

# The Travels of George M. Dawson with the British North America Boundary Commission in the Year 1873; To the Charlottes. George Dawson's 1878 Survey of the Queen Charlotte Islands; No Ordinary Man. George Dawson — 1849-1901

William A. S. Sarjeant

Volume 21, Number 3, September 1994

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/geocan21\\_3br02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/geocan21_3br02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

## Publisher(s)

The Geological Association of Canada

## ISSN

0315-0941 (print)

1911-4850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

## Cite this review

Sarjeant, W. A. S. (1994). Review of [The Travels of George M. Dawson with the British North America Boundary Commission in the Year 1873; To the Charlottes. George Dawson's 1878 Survey of the Queen Charlotte Islands; No Ordinary Man. George Dawson — 1849-1901]. *Geoscience Canada*, 21(3), 151-151.

---

### **The Travels of George M. Dawson with the British North America Boundary Commission in the Year 1873**

---

Edited by W.J. Ross  
*Historic Trails West, Lethbridge, Alberta*  
116 p., 1993

---

### **To the Charlottes. George Dawson's 1878 Survey of the Queen Charlotte Islands**

---

Edited by Douglas Cole and  
Bradley Lockner  
*UBC Press, Vancouver*  
213 p., 1993, \$19.95

---

### **No Ordinary Man. George Dawson — 1849-1901**

---

By Lois Winslow-Spragge  
Edited by Bradley Lockner  
*National Heritage/Natural History Inc.,  
Toronto*  
208 p., 1993, \$24.95

---

Reviewed by William A.S. Sarjeant  
*Department of Geological Sciences  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W0*

There is perhaps no country in the world in whose history geologists have figured so prominently as Canada. In any list of our most eminent geologists, two Dawsons would certainly figure. The Nova Scotian stratigrapher and paleontologist John William Dawson, whose work in education in his home province and as Principal of McGill University, Montreal gained him a knighthood, is most often remembered for two blunders: his advocacy of *Eozoon* as indicating "life's dawn on Earth" (*Eozoon* was later shown to be merely a pseudo-fossil), and his sedulous opposition to Darwinian theories of evolution, expressed in a long series of books and papers that make strange reading nowadays. His eldest son, George Mercer Dawson, also became a geologist of distinction; his name was perpetuated when the miners of the Yukon, appreciative of George's scientific knowledge,

courtesy and altruism, chose to call their settlement "Dawson City." George's geological work in western and northwestern Canada is regarded with high respect to this day.

However, neither of the Dawsons has been fortunate in biographical terms. Sir William's *Fifty Years of Work in Canada, Scientific and Educational* (Ballantyne, Edinburgh and London, 1901) avowedly consisted only of autobiographical notes, edited posthumously by his youngest son Rankine Dawson. Most subsequent biographies of him have been brief. The single exception, Charles O'Brien's *Sir William Dawson; A Life in Science and Religion* (American Philosophical Society, Memoir n. 1971), is unsatisfactory since it lays too much stress on Sir William's scientific involvements and tells us little concerning his domestic life and character. Two biographical works concerning George have been published. The earlier of these, Lois Winslow-Spragge's *The Life of George Mercer Dawson* (privately published, Montreal, 1962), is essentially an assembling by his niece of his family letters, as indeed its cover title indicates. The other, Joyce Barkhouse's *George Dawson, The Little Giant* (Clarke Irwin, Toronto, 1974), is both brief and superficial.

The three publications here reviewed are valuable, in that they amplify greatly our picture of the life and scientific work of the younger Dawson. The first is the initial volume of a series of six that will make available the diaries written by George between 1873 and 1887. This one covers his travels with the British North America Boundary Commission, while later volumes will contain the diaries written during field work for the Geological Survey of Canada. They were all laboriously transcribed by W.J. Ross during years of illness and published after his death; Ross' labours have furnished us with a valuable document, not only for science, but also for Canadian history.

A gap in Ross' coverage is very well filled by *To the Charlottes*, which features the daily journal and letters written by George Dawson when charged in 1878 with undertaking the first scientific survey of the Queen Charlotte Islands. (Dawson's lengthy study of the Haida Indians is also included.) While Ross' work was essentially single-handed, the authors of this volume have drawn upon the expertise of many persons, qualified

in a variety of fields, from ethnobotany, archeology and paleontology, to history and topography. In consequence, this work is extensively and meticulously annotated, in a fashion that Ross could not achieve.

The third work considered here is essentially an expanded version of Lois Winslow-Spragge's earlier compilation of letters written and received by George. It is a much handsomer volume, however, featuring 36 reproductions of photographs taken in the field, and eight colour facsimiles of George's attractive watercolours. These help us to a better understanding of a distinguished scientist who, as editor Bradley Lockner notes, "remained an intensely private individual who developed few close relationships" (p. 7) outside his immediate family.

When the definitive biographies of the two Dawsons are written, as surely they must be, these three volumes and the five future ones promised by *Historic Trails West* will surely serve as an immensely important basis for those works. In the meantime, they are of interest because of the detailed picture which George's writings give of Canada's west and northwest in the early days of European settlement.