

# A Courageous Explorer

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*George Dawson, The Little Giant*, Joyce C. Barkhouse. Clarke Irwin, 1974. 138 pp. \$7.50 cloth.

For her first book Joyce Barkhouse has researched carefully a fellow native Nova Scotian, George Dawson. Born in 1849, Dawson, son of Sir William Dawson who was the father of McGill University, was tutored at home until he was ten. A bright child with an inquiring mind and an apt pupil, George decided early to follow his father as a geologist. And this he did, so successfully that by his death in 1901, at 52, he had become Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, President of the Geological Society of America, recipient of numerous scientific awards and honorary degrees, and one of the most important geologists and natural scientists in the history of Canada.

Dawson's contributions to exploration of the Yukon and the Canadian North from the Queen Charlottes to the Ontario border are reasons enough for detailing his life; however, what makes Dawson's story unusual and the source of an inspirational biography of a courageous man is not that he succeeded in fulfilling his childhood potential but that he reached his goals despite a crippling and dwarfing childhood illness which continued to give him excruciating pain throughout his lifetime.

Although this is a slight work, approximately 118 pages of print with generous margins and large type-face, it is illuminative of Dawson's total character and personality. It provides good details about his entire life--family background, years at university in Canada and England, love of the outdoors (particularly the Canadian wilderness) and professional successes. Dawson the human being--the private person, the perfectionist, the task-master, the humourist and the humanitarian--unfolds along with Dawson the public person. We see him in equally comfortable and close relations with the Indians who gave him his nickname and the most scientific scholars of his day.

Much of the success of this book results from the extensive use of primary sources. Starting the account in 1859 with a moving fictionalized chapter of the beginning of the 10-year-old George's bout with what was probably polio, Mrs. Barkhouse has creatively combined the fictional element with a large number of these sources into an authoritative, accurate and balanced work. Dawson's own poems, extracts from letters written to his beloved sister Anna and other relatives and friends, selected passages from diaries and journals that George kept from his teens until his death, letters to George from family, friends and colleagues, personal reminiscences and even portions of professional papers do not seem likely material for a successful biography for older children and young adults. The literary and cohesive whole the author has achieved with the text deserves high commendation.

Mrs. Barkhouse and her publisher have not succeeded nearly as well with bibliographical qualities and format. Despite the attractive appearance of the dust-jacket, featuring a photograph of what could be Dawson on a lonely trek into the unknown, Clarke Irwin has skimmed on production.

There is too brief an index. Dawson's sister Anna, certainly a major figure in his life and in the book, does not even appear in the twenty-five entries. There is a longish bibliography but it appears to be something closer to a selection of the author's sources than a bibliography that the user of this volume would find either readily available or readable. Many of the titles have publication dates in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and all are adult if not academic. Some indication of the purpose and intended audience for the bibliography might have made it acceptable in its present form; however, a shorter list of titles that would have been closer to the 7th grade reading level of the book would have had more value.

The illustrations are primarily several pages of black and white photographs which vary in usefulness and quality of reproduction. The frontispiece, an undated picture of Dawson probably in early manhood, is a good choice since it captures his bright and human aspects and does not over-emphasize his hunchback and dwarfing. Early pictures of his parents and his brothers and sister are also of better quality than those that relate to Dawson's geological expeditions. Both groups of pictures are numbered and briefly identified but they are not correlated to the text and, other than that the latter group were apparently taken during the North American Boundary Commission period, several make little or no contribution to an understanding of the work. The final picture is an aerial view of Dawson City--again of questionable quality and undated.

In addition to the photographs there is a drawing of Pictou, George's birthplace, and a Canadian outline map amateurishly hand-lettered with no indication of date or text tie-in. Since the Province of Ontario and a sketchy indication of the Yukon and the North-West Territories are included, the map is clearly not limited to the Boundary Commission although it appears with these chapters. Located in the middle of the book, it is perhaps intended to help the reader check geographical references. A map representing the historical period of Dawson's explorations would have been preferable and less misleading to a young reader.

The off-white paper is of good quality; however, the binding and stitching are only adequate and will stand up -- if they do -- only because the book is small and will not put too severe a strain on the unreinforced spine. The gatherings of my review copy, on first reading, opened to expose the stitching. Considering the high quality of the manuscript, the need for good Canadian biographies for children, and the price, the reader and the librarian should have had a better made book.

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