



Yukon Prospectors' Association

- Meetings
- Metal Prices
- Home
- Hall of Fame
- Honour Roll
- Contact Us
- Prospector of the Year
- Yukon Geoscience Forum
- Properties for Option
- Larry's Corner

DR. GEORGE MERCER DAWSON: THE LITTLE GIANT

by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining.

Dr. George Mercer Dawson, one of Canada's greatest scientists, was referred to affectionately as the "Little Doctor" or the "Little Giant" because of his diminutive size.

When age 12, Dawson had been playing at a river with his older brother and some friends. Without warning, he lost consciousness. By the time his brother ran to alert the family and the youngster was brought home to bed. Dawson was nearly dead.

His severe disease, unknown to the doctors of his day, seemed to be closely akin to polio or meningitis. He was left in frail health and dwarfed by a deformed spine, a hunched back and stunted growth.

Rather than deterrents, his lifetime souvenirs seemed to have sparked Dawson's determination. At every opportunity, he challenged himself to succeed physically and intellectually.

He was born in Pictou, Nova Scotia, on August 1, 1849, the second son of Sir John William Dawson, a noted geologist and superintendent of education.

Dawson's education had started in public school but, curtailed because of health problems, he was tutored at home while re-learning to walk.

Part of his higher education was received at McGill University, where his father had been appointed as the first principal. Then he went to London and was graduated with honours from the Royal School of Mines.

Besides being an extraordinary geologist, Dr. Dawson was highly-respected as a gentleman and humanitarian.

Although crippled, he conducted some of the most strenuous surveys ever attempted in Canada. Typical of Dr. Dawson, he assigned his colleagues to the easier routes and chose the hardest ones for himself.

He wrote exhaustively about his expeditions, expounding on everything he saw and everybody he met. His legacy to us is his 1887 exploration report.

A long time out of print, the classic document was republished, a hundred years from its

writing, in 1987, by the Yukon Historical and Museums Association.

Although the Yukon Expedition took place prior to the Rush of 1898, Dr. Dawson already had recognized the Klondike as a region of vast and important mineral resources.

When the gold rush did begin on the Klondike creeks in 1896, and the first stampeders were scrambling to stake claims, Joe Ladue, an astute businessman, staked a 160-acre (64-hectare) townsite. Legally surveyed the next year, Ladue officially named Dawson City in honour of George Dawson.

At that time, Dr. Dawson was serving as the third director of the prestigious Geological Survey of Canada in Ottawa. He had been appointed in 1895 and served about six years. While in the position, he died unexpectedly of bronchitis on March 2, 1901. He was 51.

- 30 -

Articles are published on this website with the permission of the authors.
The authors retain the full copyright to their work.
1998 - 2013 Yukon Prospectors' Association