

J.B. Tyrrell (1858-1957)

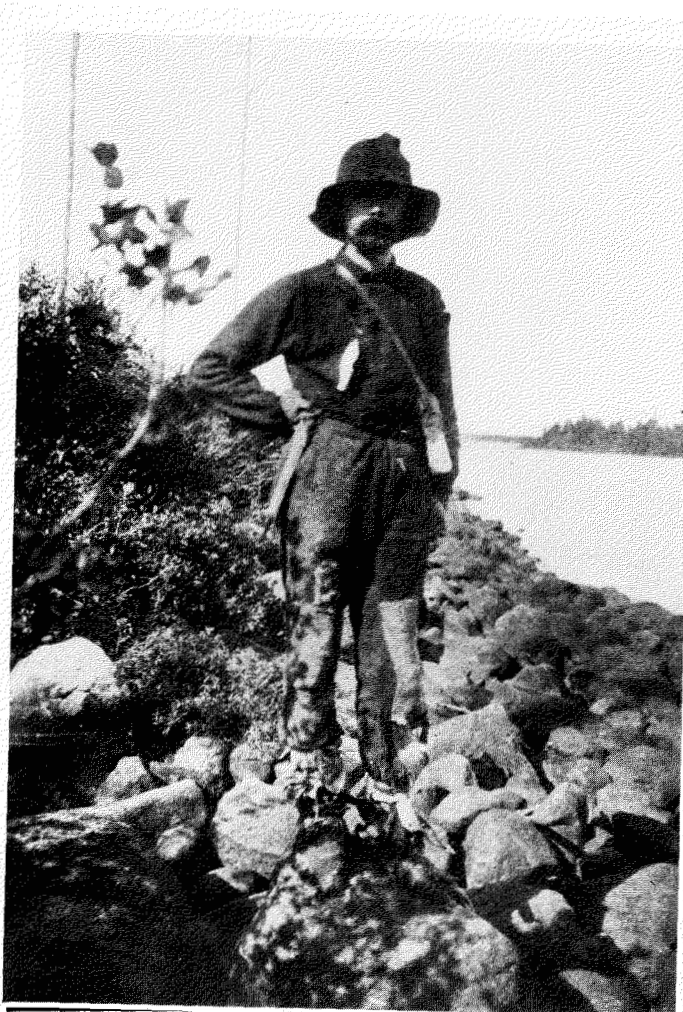


Great explorers are like great poets and great athletes. They often possess a kind of brilliance and genius that manifests itself early in life. Although J.B. Tyrrell lived for almost a century, he had completed his famous discoveries by the age of 36. In this respect he is similar to earlier Canadian explorers with whom he should be ranked — Samuel Hearne, Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson. There is only a relatively short period of one's life when knowledge, judgment, the peak of physical abilities and endurance, and historical circumstance may all combine to create a truly great achievement. J.B. Tyrrell had such a period in his life.

The rural environment of southern Ontario, where he was born in 1858, gave Joe Tyrrell an early intimacy with the natural world, which he was to study from a number of perspectives for the rest of his life. Education at Upper Canada College was followed by biological studies at the University of Toronto. In 1881, at the age of 23, Tyrrell was fortunate to secure, through family political connections, a position with

the Geological Survey of Canada, a wonderful institution for an eager young scientist to join. Tyrrell arrived at the GSC in its most glorious era. Between 1880 and 1910 the men of the Survey, who surprisingly numbered only about 20, travelled to almost every part of Canada mapping geographical and geological features, surveying potential mineral deposits, and making exhaustive botanical and zoological collections. The accomplishments of this small group are outstanding, especially when one realizes most of the work was done on horseback, on foot, or by canoe. Not only were their observations astonishingly accurate, but reading between the lines of their voluminous reports, it is obvious they were exceptionally capable wilderness travellers.

Tyrrell's first field seasons with the GSC were spent in western Alberta. In one amazing week in June 1884, he discovered both the major coal deposits around Drumheller and the famous dinosaur remains. Every summer for a decade Tyrrell travelled the west, eventually working his way north-



Photograph from Dillon Wallace's *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1905).

Hubbard did not reach Lake Michikamau; but he did see it, from a distance, on 9 September, and recorded in his diary that the sight of the lake "made it a BIG DAY." Thus his boyishness continued, though we note in him as he proceeded with the journey signs of growing maturity. "What does glory and all that amount to, after all?" he once said to Wallace, adding, "I've let my work and my ambition bother me too much." A quality of innocence and generosity stayed with him to the end.

Perhaps the most telling comment on the ill-fated expedition was made by Wallace in a letter to his sister on 3 December 1903, from North West River. "I will merely say," he wrote, "that we plunged madly into the interior of an unknown country, into regions never before trod by white men, with almost no provisions." Wallace, and Hubbard's formidable Canadian wife, Mina, undertook separate journeys up the Naskaupi in 1905, in order to accomplish what Hubbard had set out to do. Both expeditions successfully reached Ungava Bay.

FURTHER READINGS

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When they emerged from this "cursed" valley, more long portages and disappointments stretched ahead. In the evenings Hubbard read Kipling and the Bible to cheer himself and his companions; but they knew bitterly the drudgery of the coming day. On they went, sprinkling the plateau of Labrador with the toponymy of failure. As they plodded on, the days grew shorter, the nights colder, the weather stormier, and food scarcer. Hubbard and Wallace had taken with them only one pair of moccasins each, and after two weeks these were wearing through; before long they were practically barefoot. This was but one in a catalogue of blunders. Their more serious mistake was planning to live mostly off the fish and game of the wilderness. In effect, after a month of grinding work, still less than halfway to Michikamau, they were starving. By September, as Wallace later reported, "our bones were sticking through the skin."

The desperate journey back to safety started, too late, on 21 September. They ate the garbage discarded on the way inland, but game eluded them. Winter relentlessly closed in on them. Hubbard gave up the struggle and was left behind in his tent in the valley of the Susan River, where he perished. The two others floundered on towards Grand Lake, and were rescued.