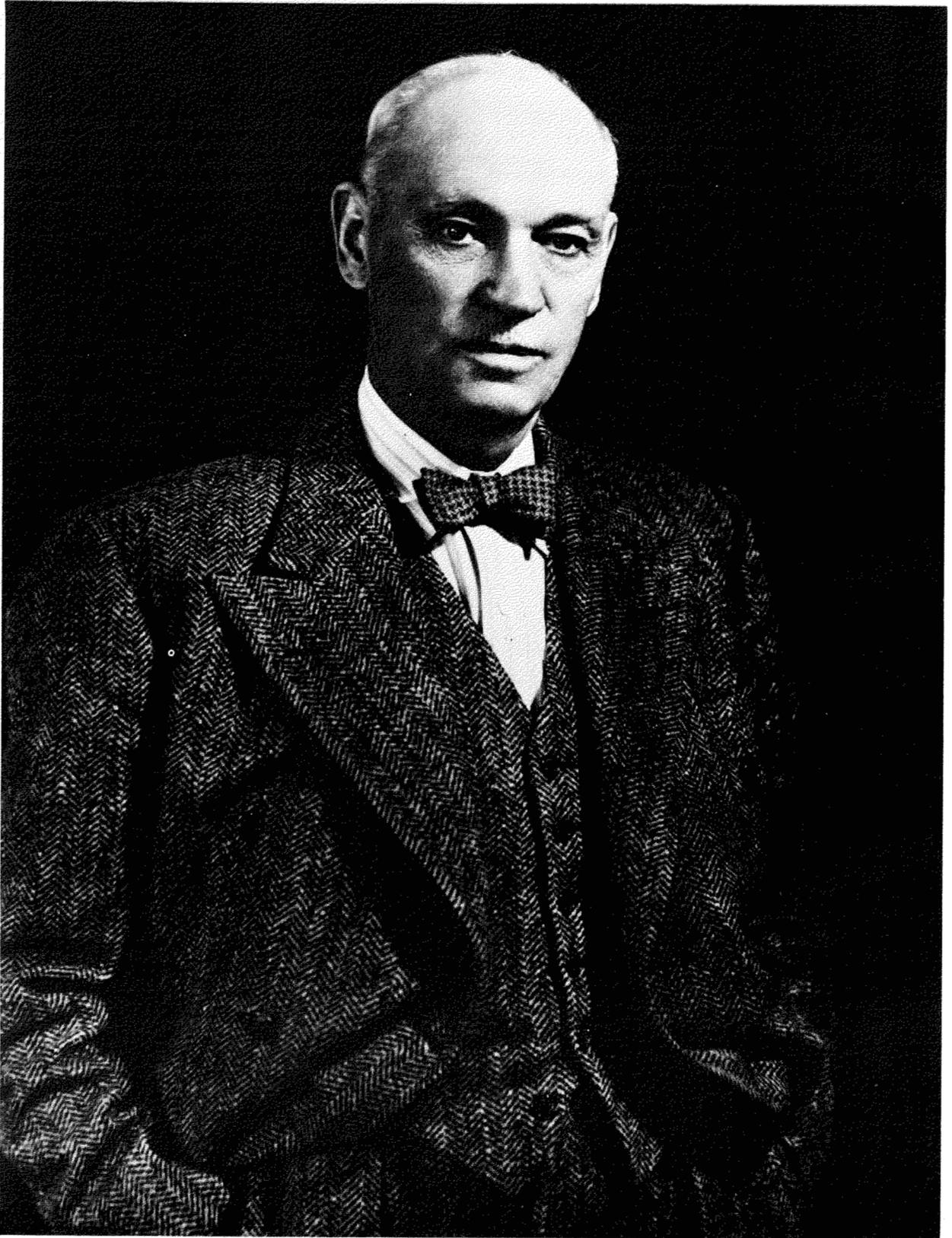


Charles Camsell (1876-1958)



Photograph courtesy of Geological Survey of Canada, Ottawa (No. 91823).

Born at Fort Liard, N.W.T., in 1876, Charles Camsell was one of the post manager's 11 children. After attending school and university in Winnipeg, he went home to Fort Simpson, where his father had been promoted to Chief Factor of the entire Mackenzie River district. The 18-year-old Camsell had no definite plans. All he knew was that he wanted to stay in the North.

Unable to find permanent work, he spent the next five years doing odd jobs — working on the river, building cabins at Hay River, teaching at Fort Norman, fishing, and trapping. When word came of a gold strike in the Klondike, Camsell and his brother Fred set out with four other men. After struggling for seven months over rough and unexplored country in bitter weather, they decided that to continue was futile, for they were still far from their destination. As quickly as it had come, the dream of sudden wealth evaporated.

A trip to Fort Providence in 1900 was the turning point in Camsell's life. He met James MacIntosh Bell of the Geological Survey, who was on his way to explore around Great Bear Lake and south to Great Slave Lake. When Bell learned that Camsell knew the region and could speak the Indian languages, he asked him to join the party, and thus began Camsell's career as a geologist.

The party consisted of Bell, Camsell, two white assistants, and Sanderson, an Indian who had travelled with Camsell. They steamed down the Mackenzie to Fort Norman, where they purchased limited supplies, including only two rifles and a fishnet. Plunging into the bush in mid-June, 1900, they reached Great Bear Lake when it was still covered with thick ice. While they waited for the ice to break up, Bell arranged for a group of Indians encamped nearby to meet the geologists on 15 August at the southeastern corner of Great Bear Lake. When conditions allowed, Bell's party surveyed along the north shore of the lake and travelled down the Dease River to the Teshierpi Mountains. By the time they were in the barrens, the food supply had grown short. Most of the party was sent back to Great Bear Lake, and with little food and no rifle, Camsell and Bell continued prospecting. When a heavy snowstorm hit on 5 August, they turned back. That same afternoon, they sighted an Eskimo camp, but the natives fled upon their approach, leaving behind a supply of caribou meat. Bell and Camsell gorged themselves, and left two steel needles and a tin plate as a goodwill offering.

When they finally reached the southeast corner of the lake, it was 27 August, nearly two weeks later than the rendezvous established with the Indians who were to guide them south to Great Slave Lake. The Indians had not waited. The geological party, now reduced to four, headed south on their own, often breaking the newly-formed ice to allow canoe passage. Fortunately, they met friendly Dogribs who supplied them with food and moccasins, and guided them to Fort Rae on Great

Slave Lake. The rest of the journey to Edmonton by canoe, dogsled, and horse and sleigh was relatively easy. They arrived in December 1900.

During the next two years, Camsell continued prospecting, usually with Bell. He explored the James Bay region for iron, prospected for gypsum in Manitoba, and found quartz with a gold-coloured vein in northern Ontario. Four gold mines — Dome, McIntyre, Porcupine, and Hollinger — are now located near Camsell's discovery in that latter region.

Early in June 1904, Camsell was appointed to the Geological Survey of Canada, and a career of over 40 years in the Civil Service began. Early surveys included the Severn River area of Ontario and the Peel River, the latter involving 2500 miles of river travel in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. Then for two years he conducted geological work in British Columbia, a welcome change from the Arctic.

On 1 January 1914, Camsell was given a new appointment: Geologist in Charge of Explorations, with the task of exploring all unsurveyed parts of Canada, an area of 900 000 square miles! By the time he had completed his first exploration, World War I had broken out. He enlisted in the Engineers but was soon removed from the army to search for minerals vital to the war effort — tungsten, mercury, potash, manganese, chromite, and magnesite.

In 1920 Camsell was promoted to Deputy Minister of Mines and later, when several departments were merged, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources. His experience and practical knowledge gave him a clear understanding of the needs of the Geological Survey and the test laboratories, and he was able to make changes that rendered them more effective. He was also appointed to the National Research Council, the International Niagara Board, and later to the post of Commissioner of the Northwest Territories. He made many trips to the North, visiting in a few hours by plane areas it had taken him months to cover by dogteam and canoe. He retired in 1945 and died in Ottawa in 1958.

FURTHER READINGS

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Margaret Mason Shaw
5 - 37 Leacrest Road
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M4G 1E5