

Historica Canada Education Portal

Joseph Tyrrell

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the J.B Tyrrell biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Tyrrell was an important geological surveyor for the Canadian government in the late nineteenth century. Among his many achievements, he mapped the North, discovered coal, and the remains of what became known as the Albertasaurus.

Aims

Although there is now a museum in Tyrrell's honour, he was not recognized for his achievements in his lifetime. Students will research Tyrrell's achievements, using both primary and secondary sources, and assess the importance of his discoveries.

Background

In 1884, Joseph Tyrrell, geological surveyor for the Government of Canada, led a small group of explorers and cartographers into Alberta's badlands. There he made the major discovery of his life: the remains of a 6,000 year old dinosaur – the Albertasaurus. Unfortunately, he was

denied the recognition for this discovery and this became a metaphor for his life. The man whose mission was to chart the unknown felt overlooked and misunderstood himself.

Joseph Burr Tyrrell was born in Weston, Ontario, on 1 November 1858. He witnessed Canada's Confederation as a young boy in Toronto, and even though he was small and sickly, he caught the fever of a new country and dreamed about a life of adventure and exploration. His dream would come true as a geological surveyor for the Canadian government and his work took him to the uncharted wilds of Canada. He mapped the Great Plains of Alberta, and later the Northwest Territories, which were so unknown at the time that they were thought to be inhabited by cannibals.

He saw his work as "trailblazing" and indeed it was, but his superiors in the "faceless Ottawa bureaucracy" found him arrogant and difficult. This career-long antagonism would effectively deny him recognition or advancement. With the discovery of *Albertasaurus*, the first carnivorous dinosaur discovered in Canada, his superiors orchestrated a campaign to "keep him out of the limelight," and they banished him to obscure survey work in Manitoba where he worked without a raise for the next seven years. Tyrrell became frustrated, and later embittered. He eventually left government work to stake gold claims in the Yukon.

For his life-long ambitions, Tyrrell sacrificed much of his personal life. He put his engagement "on hold," and his eventual marriage and family life took perpetual second-place. His loving wife Doll was left at home to worry during his long expeditions. She eventually followed him to Dawson, and constantly supported "his many contradictions," but a court case fought against him over mining stakes in the Yukon was the final blow. Doll had a nervous breakdown and never fully recovered. Tyrrell's

children never quite forgave him.

Tyrrell's accomplishments and discoveries were many, and his prospecting made him millions, but when he died in 1957, he was a lonely and bitter old man as a result of being denied recognition for his achievements. Today his life and achievements are celebrated at The Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, Alberta.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Trace the career of Tyrrell on a map including relevant dates. Students should be briefed on this task before watching the video so that they might record the appropriate information. The teacher should also record the dates and events before the class in case anything is missed. This activity should yield a visual and geographical timeline.

2. As a follow-up to the above activity, individual groups could do some research (using both primary and secondary resources) on each of the sites/dates. A short write-up could be done for each which could be put on a map with the appropriate date(s). Tyrrell wrote many books on his different surveys and an examination of these could prove interesting for the students.

3. Show the [Heritage Minute](#) about Tyrrell. Notice that this Minute features his discovery of the *Albertasaurus*. Based on Tyrrell's other

accomplishments, ask the class to debate whether or not this was his most important discovery. If it was not, then why was it chosen to be in the *Historica Minute*, rather than his discovery of coal or his journey to Hudson Bay? The discussion could lead to further debate as to what we consider important enough to include in our history.

4. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to come up with three of the most significant events or turning points in Tyrrell's life. The students should then defend their choices in an open forum. Perhaps with some debate, the class might come to some consensus.

5. Ask the class to discuss whether or not Tyrrell deserves to be a part of *The Canadians* series. What were his contributions to Canadian society and history; how significant were they? In addition to this, the class could imagine what the map of Canada might be like without the work of this geological surveyor. Perhaps maps from the earlier 19th century could be located to use as a comparison. Local archives might have maps that could be accessed for this comparison.

6. The title for this documentary is "The Long River." Discuss why the authors chose this title and not some other. Present arguments for and against this choice of titles. What other titles could have been used? Suggest and discuss other possible titles.

Required Materials:

Maps from the 19th Century would enhance the fifth activity.

Resources

[Joseph Tyrell Worksheet](#)

[Joseph Tyrell - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Inglis, Alex. *Northern Vagabond: The Life and Career of J.B. Tyrrell*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978.

Loudon, William James. *A Canadian Geologist*. Toronto: MacMillan, 1930.

Mason Shaw, Margaret. *Geologists and Prospectors: Tyrrell, Camsell, Cross, LaBine*. Toronto: Clarke - Irwin, 1958.

Tyrrell, J.B. *The Gold of the Klondike*. Ottawa: Royal Society Of Canada, 1912.

[Royal Tyrrell Museum](#)