

John Clarence Webster: The Laird of Shediac

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Volume 3, Number 1, Autumn 1973

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad3_1art04

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Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stanley, G. F. G. (1973). John Clarence Webster:: The Laird of Shediac. *Acadiensis*, 3(1), 51–71.

GEORGE F. G. STANLEY

John Clarence Webster

The Laird of Shediac

It was in the spring of 1936, when I first heard about John Clarence Webster. I was spending an evening with the English historian, Basil Williams, who was then staying in Oxford, and during the course of our conversation, I mentioned that I was going to take up an appointment at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, in the autumn term. Williams remarked that New Brunswick was the home of the "laird of Shediac" and then went on to tell me about him. At this date I do not recall the details of our conversation — I wish I did — but I never forgot either Dr. Webster's name or the title which Basil Williams assigned him.

On arriving in Sackville early in September, I was told by Dr. George J. Trueman, the president of Mount Allison, that Dr. Webster was a graduate of the university, who had had a distinguished career in medicine and had retired to Shediac where he was engaged actively in various projects of a historical nature. He also mentioned that, for some years, there had been a distinct chilliness between himself and Dr. Webster owing, apparently, to Mount Allison's rejection of the maritime university federation scheme sponsored by the Carnegie foundation, a scheme to which Dr. Webster had given whole-hearted support. The president felt that he could do little to warm the atmosphere and hoped that my appointment, the first in Canadian history at Mount Allison, might contribute in some way towards reviving Dr. Webster's interest in his old university. It was with this end in view that he asked me to join Ross Flemington, then principal of Mount Allison Academy and Dr. Trueman's eventual successor as president of the University, in paying a formal visit to Dr. Webster at Shediac. It was, to me, an interesting experience. By this time I had learned something of Dr. Webster's remarkable career, and although I had been led to believe that I would encounter a man of extreme irascibility, I found, instead, a warm-hearted, sincere and hospitable man, for whom I was to develop a firm affection and a genuine admiration.

I doubt if I ever fulfilled Dr. Trueman's hopes of bringing about a recon-

ciliation. After all, Dr. Webster was a man of strong views and held them strongly. I am not sure that I made very much of an effort to act as a mediator between the two men, probably because I was much more interested in Dr. Webster the historian, than in Dr. Webster the possible benefactor of Mount Allison. I was fascinated, not only by the historical materials that Dr. Webster had collected, by the papers and books he had published, but also by the role which he hoped the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John and the federal government museum at Beauséjour might play in the life of the people of New Brunswick.

As far as I know, Dr. Webster never did hold any feelings of animosity towards Dr. Trueman. Once the maritime university federation scheme failed to materialize, Dr. Webster gave it no more thought, although he did talk to me of the possible advantages that might accrue from some kind of a scheme by which students in the New Brunswick universities might move from one university to another to specialize in those fields in which one or other of the universities at Fredericton, Sackville or St. Joseph might enjoy certain advantages. I recall in particular his remarks that in one year at St. Joseph, an English-speaking student would acquire a greater proficiency by specializing in French than by following French courses elsewhere for four consecutive years. As far as the university at Sackville was concerned, he did not hold it in very high esteem; nevertheless he was ready to accept, as a replacement for Dr. Alfred Bailey, when the latter moved from the Saint John Museum to a professorial appointment at his old university at Fredericton, a Mount Allison student, Donald Trenholm, who was completing a M.A. in history under my direction.

During the late nineteen thirties Dr. Webster spoke to me, with increasing frequency, of the possibility of my assuming, at an early date, some of his responsibilities on the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, and in connection with the two museums. I was interested in promoting an archeological dig at the Fort Beauséjour site near Sackville and in accompanying Dr. Webster on some of his trips to collect items of museum interest, either for the Saint John or Beauséjour museums. An exciting career in maritime province history seemed to be on the horizon. I therefore turned my back on the history of western Canada in which I had done my doctoral work and began historical research and writing in the maritime field. Then, suddenly, everything changed. As a militia officer I went on active service on the outbreak of the Second World War. Dr. Webster, who had been contemplating withdrawing from some of his activities, was obliged to continue them without relief. On the conclusion of World War II, I met Dr. Webster in Ottawa, where he was attending a meeting of the Historic Sites Board, to ask his advice about an offer which I had received from Dr. Norman Mackenzie, of a professorial chair in Canadian history at the University of British Columbia. Whether Dr. Webster still had a place for me in his post-

war plans, I cannot say. All I know is that it was with Dr. Webster's encouragement that I went to Vancouver in 1947. Two years later I wrote him telling him that I expected to return to Eastern Canada, but that I was going to stop over a few years at the Royal Military College of Canada. Those "few years" became twenty. It was not until 1969 that I was finally back again at Mount Allison. But by that time the man Basil Williams had called "the laird of Shediac", in our conversation in 1936, had been nineteen years in his grave.

II

John Clarence Webster was born in Shediac on 21 October 1863. His father had been born at sea, while en route from Scotland to Canada, and his mother's people came from the English county of Yorkshire. John Clarence's early education was obtained in the primary school and at the Grammar School in Shediac. The latter institution was under the direction of a graduate of Edinburgh University, a Scot by the name of D. B. White. Despite his father's lack of enthusiasm for higher education — had he not made a success of life without it? — the young Webster was encouraged by his teacher, Sophia Nesbitt, to continue his studies. Accordingly, at the age of fifteen, he went to Mount Allison University, a small Methodist college in the town of Sackville, some thirty miles or so distant from Shediac, which had been authorized by provincial statute in 1858 to grant university degrees. Webster spent four years at the Sackville college and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1882. He was an idealistic youth, of a humanistic turn of mind who thought vaguely of theology, but who found traditional theology restrictive and unenlightening, and who preferred the sciences, history and literature to the traditional classical disciplines, Greek and Latin, and to philosophy and metaphysics as they were taught at Mount Allison. Years later he wrote, "If I had given the time to modern languages which I wasted on Latin and Greek, I would have been more benefited, even though I would not have been more interested in the study. However, their value in modern life would have been an incentive to me."¹ Commenting generally upon his experiences at Mount Allison, he added, "Looking back over my college course, I cannot but admit that it was not a very satisfactory performance. I did well enough in examinations; indeed I stood high, but I worked without any special enthusiasm or inspiration. I was young and there were too many subjects and too many examinations."²

Unlike many students of the current generation, Clarence Webster knew whither he was bound and how he was going to get there. He was interested in people and desired to help them. He had therefore set his heart upon a

1 J. C. Webster. *Those Crowded Years 1863-1944* (Shediac, privately printed for his Family, 1944), p. 3.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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career in medicine and upon carrying on his medical studies at Edinburgh University. His intention of going to Scotland in the autumn of 1882, following upon his graduation from Mount Allison, was not, however, fulfilled. Although he did not appreciate it at the time, it was his good fortune that a bout of typhoid fever prevented him from taking passage on the vessel in which he had hoped to sail. She went down at sea with no survivors. It was not until the following April that John Clarence sailed from Halifax on the Allan steamship, *Nova Scotian*, and reached the grey stone, and oftentimes grey-misted, city of Edinburgh. After finding lodgings he enrolled in the summer session of 1883 and settled down to prepare himself for his chosen profession at Edinburgh University.

Clarence Webster's experience at Edinburgh is one which always remained as vivid in his memory as the city and its university remained dear to his heart. Despite the tremendous contrast between the small, denominational college beside the Tantramar marshes and the large, metropolitan university in the one-time capital of Scotland, in terms of size and intensity of competition among the student body, the young New Brunswicker quickly adapted himself. He loved the university, its traditions, its competent staff, its cosmopolitan character. His horizons were enlarged and his mind was excited by the sense of freedom which he enjoyed there for the first time. To these things, new and unfamiliar though they were, he responded with enthusiasm. He applied himself diligently to his studies and took no part in sports and athletics, except occasional long walks to sites of historical interest, and small part in the social life of the student body beyond a few games of chess, checkers and whist. It was in this way that he developed that philosophy and those habits of hard work which sustained him through his life. Despite all too frequent illnesses, he finally graduated in 1888 with the degrees of Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery. Now he was qualified to enter upon the practice of his profession of medicine; but he preferred to continue his studies, working in the research laboratories of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh. In 1890 he obtained the degree of Doctor of Medicine. His doctoral thesis, for which he was awarded the university's gold medal, was published by the Royal College in two volumes and distributed to medical institutions throughout the world. It was a distinction which had never been accorded to any previous doctoral candidate by the Royal College.³ Years later, after his death, his original drawings for his thesis were placed in the Osler Library at McGill University.

By this time John Clarence Webster regarded Edinburgh as his spiritual home. It was here that he wished to remain and here that he believed he could make his greatest contribution to medicine. "In course of time," he wrote, "I felt entirely at home and grew to feel that there could not be a more

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

delightful city in the world.”⁴ That is why, after several months working in the hospital and laboratory in Berlin, instead of returning to Canada, he spent a year with Dr. Freeland Barbour, Lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Edinburgh, and then accepted an appointment as the First Assistant to Professor Alexander Simpson, who held the Chair of Midwifery and Diseases of Women at the University. The duties of this appointment were demanding of Webster’s time and energy, involving as they did professional practice as well as teaching and research. However, during the next six years, between 1890 and 1896, he wrote four books, one of which was translated into German, and seventeen scientific papers. Whether it was the result of the heavy burden of work which he assumed, or the peculiarities of the Scottish climate, Webster seems to have been subject to all too frequent bouts of influenza, bronchitis and laryngitis. So much so, that his medical colleagues, fearing an onset of tuberculosis, advised him to return to Canada. After two months’ rest at Shediac, he moved to Montreal where he became Assistant Gynaecologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital and shortly afterwards Lecturer in Gynaecology at McGill University. While at the Royal Victoria Hospital he suffered a serious attack of blood poisoning, which led him to adopt the practice of wearing rubber gloves in all operative work. In this respect he was an innovator. John Clarence Webster was the first man to adopt rubber-glove surgery in Montreal and the first to introduce it as a regular technique in the Medical School in Chicago.

Perhaps he was too much of an innovator. There are stories of friction between himself and the authorities at the Royal Victoria Hospital. In any event Dr. Webster remained only two and a half years in Montreal. In 1899, at the age of thirty-six, he was invited to become Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Rush Medical College (the Medical School then affiliated with the University of Chicago) and head of the same department in the Presbyterian Hospital and the Central Free Dispensary. Just prior to making this move, Webster married Alice Lusk, the daughter of William Thompson Lusk, Chief of Obstetrics at the Bellevue Hospital in New York. For twenty years Dr. Webster held his appointments in Chicago, engaged in the demanding round of practice, research, teaching and administration, always publishing books and scientific papers. He took on himself a task heavy enough to exhaust any man, and yet he found time to build up a teaching museum for which, with his wife’s assistance, he made many plaster casts and watercolour medical sketches. When he found time for relaxation, he occupied it with general reading and collecting Japanese engravings and paintings. He threw himself wholeheartedly into this activity — as he did when he began to collect Canadiana — just at a time when the western public was

4 *Ibid.*, p. 11. See also J. C. Webster, *Edinburgh Memories* (Sackville, privately printed, 1943) p. 6.

beginning to take an interest in Oriental art. It was characteristic of the man that whatever he did, he had to do it well. Thus, in pursuing a hobby, he made himself an authority on Japanese art and built up a collection that was excelled only by that of the Metropolitan Museum.⁵ Much of this collection was subsequently sold in Boston, but several Japanese paintings were given to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and other items to the museum in Saint John, New Brunswick.

When war broke out in 1914 between Great Britain and Germany, Dr. Webster hastened to offer his services to the Canadian Army medical authorities in Ottawa. There was, however, no place for a man of Dr. Webster's age — he was now fifty-one — in the Canadian army, and so he continued his work in Chicago. Then in 1916 he was stricken with a serious gall-bladder infection. "I had rather a bad time of it, but pulled through", he wrote.⁶ The next two years became increasingly difficult for Dr. Webster. With the entry of the United States into the war, a number of young physicians and surgeons went into the armed services, leaving the civilian hospitals short-handed. Finally, when the University of Chicago undertook to reorganize the medical school, Dr. Webster felt physically incapable of undertaking the additional strain that such a task would involve. He therefore tendered his resignation in the autumn of 1919. A holiday of several months in Bermuda did not shake his resolution, and in 1920 Dr. Webster and his family left Chicago to return to live in the New Brunswick town of Shediac.

III

During the years he had spent at school at Shediac and at Mount Allison University, Dr. Webster had listened to his teachers talk about the history of England. Of Canada he learned little, and of New Brunswick, nothing at all. More than once in conversation he indicated to me his irritation at the absence from the curriculum of any study of Canadian history, and his hope that my appointment at Mount Allison might indicate a new trend in Canadian university education. Here, he would point out, in the isthmus of Chignecto, we were living in the heart of a region for which the great powers of Europe, England and France, had vied for empire, scarcely more than a century prior to his own birthday, and yet the details of this struggle were unknown to school boys and university students, and the tangible evidences of this dramatic period of Imperial history had been allowed to fall into decay. It had been in Scotland, not in Canada, that he had discovered history. There he found it in every stone. That was why he had undertaken the walking tours through the streets of the old city of Edinburgh and into its environs.

5 N. S. Heaney, "John Clarence Webster, 1863-1950", *Proceedings of the Institute of Medicine*, Chicago, Vol. 18 (1950), p. 174.

6 *Those Crowded Years*, p. 16.

which had quickened his interest in history as it deepened his knowledge of the land of his forefathers. That was why, after he had retired from his medical career and had returned to Canada, he made himself familiar with the history of his own land, thus doing for himself what he believed ought to have been done for him by the educational system. His Chicago friends had warned him that he would perish of *ennui* in Shediac; that he would miss the constant intellectual activity of a large metropolitan area; that he would vegetate or "go to pieces" in a region in which nothing had, or was likely to happen. But time was to prove that these Cassandras were, as Dr. Webster remarked, "false prophets". "Never once," he wrote, "have I regretted the step I have taken, nor have I wished to resume my old activities."⁷ The fact was that much had happened in the Chignecto region, and time and energy would have to be expended to find out about it.

Once removed to Shediac, he settled down on the family land in a substantial house which had been erected as a summer home in 1913-14, and set about to find new interests to absorb his time and energy. He was always inspired by his humanistic approach to life, by his desire to help his fellow men either by expanding the knowledge of their achievements in the field of medicine, or in the field of arts and letters. The clue to his career at this stage of his life is afforded by his remarks to the National Conference on Education and Citizenship, held in Montreal in April 1926. In his address he deplored the general stagnation and lack of enterprise in the Atlantic area in almost every field of endeavour. He said, "Serious as may be the stagnation in trade, I am much more perturbed by the stagnation and decadence in cultural and educational standards and in the higher thought of the country. Indeed, many of the economic ills are directly traceable to the latter conditions. The inspiration, even the lessons of the past, have been forgotten by the majority, and we live only in the present, the richness of our great heritage entirely ignored as a motive force in our national life. . . ."⁸ Subsequently he developed this theme further in his pamphlet *The Distressed Maritimes* in words which would have a stronger appeal to the nationally-minded youth of today than to those of the nineteen twenties. He criticized the Canadian who thought of his land "not as part of a mighty heritage, which has been won through blood and sacrifice and made sacred by the memories of the past" but merely in terms "of its value in dollars", and urged upon the people of the maritime provinces that "the status of a nation is measured not merely by its material wealth, but by its contributions to science, art and literature, and by the evidence which exists of a widespread appreciation of culture among the people".⁹

7 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

8 Quoted in A. G. Bailey, *The John Clarence Webster Collection* (Saint John, The New Brunswick Museum Collections No. 1, 1936), pp. 3-4.

9 J. C. Webster, *The Distressed Maritimes* (Toronto, 1926), p. 46.

Tradition had admittedly played a role in the maritime provinces; unfortunately it was not the inspiring tradition of past achievement but the shackling tradition of time-dishonoured prejudices. What the maritimes needed was the vitalizing force of new knowledge; and one of the first steps in this direction should be to search for factual truth. Fact, not fiction, would give strength and meaning to tradition. That is why Dr. Webster settled upon history for his second career; why he imposed upon himself a demanding programme of travel and study; why he journeyed to various archival institutions in Canada and abroad, established friendly relations with their custodians and became familiar with the leading dealers in books and manuscripts. Driven by the same intensity of spirit that had motivated him in building up his collection of Japanese art, he now built up a collection of Canadiana which was unrivalled in its day. He took very much to heart the well known admonition of Joseph Howe, "A wise nation preserves its records, gathers its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual references to the sacrifices and glories of the past".

Throughout his life Dr. Webster was something of a hero worshipper. In his short autobiography he remarked upon the impression made upon him at Edinburgh by the great scientists of the day. And when he first became interested in history, his hero figure was James Wolfe. One of his first non-medical publications was his "A Visit to the Birthplace of James Wolfe", which appeared in *The Canadian Magazine* in 1897. Why Wolfe? One can only speculate. Was it because he and Wolfe were both men of slight build, lacking great physical strength, subject to periodic illness, yet moved by strength of spirit and singleness of purpose? There is something of a similarity between the two men. But whatever the explanation, John Clarence Webster accumulated a considerable amount of material dealing with Wolfe and rapidly established a reputation as an authority on the British commander of whom most Canadians know little more than that he defeated Montcalm at Quebec in 1759. It was therefore a source of pleasure to Dr. Webster to be invited to attend the great banquet in London, held on 3 January 1927, commemorating the bicentenary of Wolfe's birth at Westerham, England, as the official representative of the Royal Society of Canada, to which he had been elected a Fellow in 1924.

But Wolfe, fascinating as he was, yielded place, over the years, to the local history of the maritime provinces as Dr. Webster's prime interest. After his appointment in 1923 as the New Brunswick representative on the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada — in 1943 he became Chairman of the Board — Dr. Webster was able to throw himself whole-heartedly into what became the main work of his second career. His presence on the Board had effect, not only of stimulating his interest in New Brunswick history, particularly the history of the French period, but in directing it to-

wards the field of historical museums. Marking historic sites, was, admittedly, an important activity; but what was even more important was to bring this history to the mass of the people as an educational activity. To do this effectively would require the establishment of historic parks and the construction of historical museums. Dr. Webster had already learned from his experience in Europe how significant would be the role of the museum as an educational institution; he had, in fact, used the museum as a teaching tool at the Medical School in Chicago. Thus, during the nineteen twenties and thirties, he devoted many of his efforts to the development of museums in the maritime provinces. The historic museum at Fort Anne served as a useful precedent. It had been successfully established by the Annapolis Royal Historical Society in conjunction with the Nova Scotia government, and Dr. Webster pressed hard for the establishment of similar museums at Louisbourg and Beauséjour. Largely as a result of his initiative and his whole-hearted co-operation with the federal authorities, sites of the forts at Beauséjour and Gaspereau in the Chignecto Isthmus were designated as National Historic Parks by the federal government. Dr. Webster joined forces with Senator J.S. McLennan in Nova Scotia in persuading the federal authorities to set aside the site of the great fortress of Louisbourg as a historic park. Not content with this he also lent his support to the establishment of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax and became the driving force behind the construction of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John.

It was in 1929 when Dr. Webster, Howard Robinson, and several other prominent citizens of Saint John took the first steps to establish a historical museum in New Brunswick. It was agreed that Saint John would probably be the most suitable location for such a museum. The Natural History Society of that city had a valuable collection which badly needed new housing, and Dr. Webster offered to give added importance to the museum by donating his historical collection. Colonel Murray MacLaren started a public subscription with a gift of \$25,000 and in the following spring, the premier introduced a measure into the House of Assembly incorporating the museum and providing a provincial appropriation of \$150,000 for the erection of a building. The Mayor and Corporation of Saint John followed this with a grant of \$100,000. On 27 June 1931 the corner-stone was laid by the Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable H.H. MacLean, and on 16 August 1934, on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the province, the new museum was officially opened to the public. Dr. Webster had originally willed that his collection should go to the museum on his death, but realizing the great loss which might incur should his premises be destroyed by fire, he transferred his collection to Saint John once the new building was completed. To the museum went the maps, plans, historical scenes and portraits he had brought together, and several paintings of considerable historical interest, including James Barry's "Death of Wolfe" painted in 1776, Romney's "Head

of Wolfe”, John Trumbull’s portrait of General Murray, and John Singleton Copley’s portrait of Brook Watson, and a set of miniatures of British officers who fought in the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution. The removal of these and other paintings and engravings to Saint John left the walls of his house at Shediac bare and unadorned, but “gradually, most of the blank places became covered”, he wrote later, “though not in such profusion, and in time, I ceased to miss the collection or to grieve over its departure.”¹⁰ Although he did not say so, he must surely have felt a sense of pride in the fact that it was his collection which enabled the New Brunswick Museum to transcend “the status of a provincial institution” and attain “to that of a national treasure house of art and history”.¹¹

The museum encountered financial difficulties in its early years. Owing to the economic depression, the subsidies promised by the provincial and municipal governments were not forthcoming for several years, and the director, Dr. William MacIntosh, carried on his duties without remuneration. Mrs. J.C. Webster, who had first found life in Shediac rather heavy on her hands, now devoted herself to the work of the art gallery and the school service branch of the museum. Among other things she purchased and prepared a series of coloured prints of great works of art over the ages, which were circulated to the schools of the province, thus bringing to New Brunswick children the experience of paintings they might never otherwise have seen. Dr. Webster’s particular interest was the museum’s Department of Canadian History which came under the direction of Dr. Alfred Bailey who, in 1935, was assigned to the museum by the Carnegie corporation for training as curator. On Dr. Bailey’s appointment to the staff of the University of New Brunswick in 1938, he was succeeded by Donald T. Trenholm. Although he had been promised leave of absence and special training in the field of museum administration, Trenholm gave up the appointment in 1941, moving to Montreal to become a high school teacher. Subsequently his responsibilities were taken over by Miss Margaret Evans, and later by George MacBeath. Among Dr. Webster’s happiest moments were those in which he watched groups of school children trooping through the museum, when he could himself talk to them and convey to them some of the enthusiasm for the historical heritage of Canada and the maritimes which now absorbed so much of his vitality.

The museum dearest to Dr. Webster’s heart was probably that at Beauséjour. Located in the centre of the Acadian region, in what is now New Brunswick, Beauséjour was the most vital point in mainland eastern Canada during the French régime. For its possession Englishmen and New Englanders had contended with the French of Canada, and the Americans had fought the

¹⁰ *Those Crowded Years*, p. 33.

¹¹ Bailey, *The Webster Collection*, p. 15.

British during the American Revolution. However, after the Revolution the fort was abandoned and save for a few hurried repairs during the War of 1812, nothing was done to maintain it as a post of military or even historical significance. The original stone work was allowed to crumble, the well to be blocked with debris, the ditches to fill with earth, and the walls to erode. By the present century only the outlines remained to remind the casual visitor of the stirring times of former years. As a result of Dr. Webster's initiative the land on which the fort stood was finally declared a national historic site in 1926. Webster's aim was, in his own words, "to induce the Dominion Government to carry out measures which would result in bringing to the attention of our people the points of historic interest in the entire Chignecto area, the marking of its historic sites, the preservation of the Fort and the establishment of a Historical Museum — lines of development which had been successfully carried out at Fort Anne in Annapolis Royal and at Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, I urged these measures not only for the benefits — educational, recreational and inspirational, which would accrue to our own people, but because they would provide additional attractions for tourists from far and near".¹² This last appeal probably carried the greatest weight — in our society history has little meaning for the Philistines except as a commercial asset. In August 1928 the park was officially inaugurated and monuments were erected to La Vallière and to the Yorkshire settlers. In 1935 a stone museum, built in the Canadian style, was erected at Fort Beauséjour. Dr. Webster had spent some time collecting exhibits and these were placed in the new museum. The official opening took place in the summer of 1936 with the Rt. Hon. R.B. Bennett, Hon. J.B.M. Baxter, Hon. Walter Foster, Hon. Allison Dysart, Hon Thane Campbell and Hon. Sir Joseph Chisholm, on the platform. The museum soon proved its popularity and justified the money spent on it; in 1939 and 1948 two new wings were added, the last carrying the name of John Clarence Webster.

During the years when he was serving as Honorary Curator of the Beauséjour historical museum, Dr. Webster enjoyed a free hand as far as the National Parks Board was concerned. No one raised any objection when he set out to make the museum a historical centre for the people of the Chignecto Isthmus. He persuaded, cajoled and bullied his friends and others living in the vicinity to contribute their memorabilia to the museum, and gave to it freely of his own collection of books, maps, photographs and documents. He stipulated that these items should not be removed from the museum or leave the Chignecto region without the permission of the donors. At the same time he listened with interest to my proposals for archaeological digs, using students at Mount Allison University — after all, had not articles of all kinds from bones, arrow heads and cannon balls to pewter plates and

¹² *Those Crowded Years*, p. 20.

gold and silver coins been unearthed in the region during the nineteenth century by farmers and railway workers?

Following Dr. Webster's death, his friend, counsellor and historical mentor, Ralph W. Hewson, Q.C. of Moncton — it had been Hewson who had first introduced Dr. Webster to the family genealogies of Chignecto and taken him to the ruins of Fort Beauséjour and sparked his interest in the old French fort — was appointed honorary curator of the museum; but without Webster's forceful personality and influence to direct it, the museum gradually underwent a change. The centralization policy of the National Historic Parks administration in Ottawa left no room for local initiative, and in the end the Webster plans for developing a strong local interest in Beauséjour gave way to the bureaucrat's desire for uniformity and the adoption of current museum techniques for the purpose of attracting tourists, not local inhabitants, to visit the fort. Some of the artifacts and most of the documents disappeared from the show cases; several items, originally on loan to the Beauséjour museum, were transferred to the Acadian Museum at the Université de Moncton; others went to the federal archives in Ottawa; and others, of lesser importance, were turned over to the Library of Mount Allison University. Today, little more than the Webster wing and the colours of The New Brunswick Rangers, of which Dr. Webster was the honorary lieutenant-colonel, remain to remind the visitor of the kind of museum he had hoped that Beauséjour might become.

IV

During his first, or medical career, Dr. Webster had been both an active research worker and an active writer. He believed that the new scientific and medical discoveries should become as widely known as possible, not for the glory of the discovery, but for the good which they might accomplish for mankind. It was this conviction that led him, between 1890 and 1916, to publish no fewer than twelve books on anatomy, obstetrics and operative gynaecology, and ninety-six papers on similar subjects in various surgical and medical journals. It was the same conviction that led him, once he had entered his second or historical career, to pursue his researches in his newly chosen field and to make his discoveries available to other historians by publication. In the years between 1922 and 1950, Dr. Webster published approximately fifty historical books, pamphlets and papers, many of them at his own expense.

His earliest historical publications were those which reflected his interest at that time, Major General James Wolfe. Of these, the most significant, and interesting, was his work on the portraits of Wolfe. In 1925 he delivered a paper to the Fellows of the Royal Society of Canada which aroused considerable interest and which was not only published in the *Transactions*

of the Society, but was expanded and published by The Ryerson Press of Toronto in 1930. This little book of seventy-four pages, *Wolfe and the Artists; A Study in his Portraiture*, is a delightful piece of work, bringing together many facts about Wolfe which had hitherto been unknown to historians, and analysing as well as listing the various works of art for which Wolfe provided the subject.

It was, however, when he moved into the maritime province field of history that Webster made his greatest contributions to our knowledge. In 1928 the New Brunswick Government Bureau of Information and Tourist Travel published Webster's *Historical Guide to New Brunswick*. This attractive book of 114 pages, contained in compact form the essential facts about the historical figures and places of the province of New Brunswick. It was illustrated with old maps and pictures and was of use, not just to the passing tourist, but also to the schoolteacher and to the college professor. As a professor at Mount Allison I had recourse to Webster's *Guide* on numerous occasions both when teaching and when travelling in the province. The book went through a number of editions until the end of the Second World War. Since that time it has unfortunately been out of print. The present Department of Tourism in Fredericton would do well to have the book revised and once more make it available to the people of New Brunswick and our visitors.

During the late nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties, Dr. Webster concentrated his historical research on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Acadia. His output at this time was remarkable for a man in his late sixties and seventies. Not only did he read papers on Joseph Frederick Waller Des Barres, John Montresor, Samuel Vetch and Cornelis Steenwyck before the Royal Society of Canada and the Canadian Historical Association, he also published a series of journals which have made his name blessed by subsequent generations of students and teachers. Among those published in booklet form were the *Journal of Lieut. Col. William Amherst*, the British officer who had recovered St. John's, Newfoundland from the French in 1762; the *Journal of Abijah Willard*, which dealt with the siege of Beauséjour in 1755 and the punitive measures adopted by the British victors towards the Acadian settlers; and *The Career of the Abbé Le Loutre*, a statement of all ascertained facts about Le Loutre and the accusations made against him, drawn from contemporary letters and journals, and including Le Loutre's own statement, translated by Mrs. Webster. If nothing else, this last provides the reader with the means of assessing one of Acadia's most controversial figures. In publishing Mrs. Webster's translation of *The Siege of Beauséjour; A Journal of the Attack by Jacau de Fiedmont*, Dr. Webster did a real service to the students of the Seven Years' War. Fiedmont's journal was written as a report to his former superior officer, Surlaville, and not as a public justification of his actions. It is a good, reliable account and the Webster version

is accompanied by views and plans of the fort. Fiedmont's journal appeared as the first of a series of historical publications sponsored by The New Brunswick Museum. The second of the series was *The Journal of Joshua Winslow*, and the third was a booklet containing the *Journals of John Thomas and Louis de Courville*, both of which touch upon the conflict in the Chignecto Isthmus as seen through the eyes of a British surgeon-mate with General Monckton and a French notary who lived at Fort Beauséjour. To these publications of the nineteen thirties we may add Dr. Webster's short biographical studies of *Charles des Champs de Boishébert* and *Joseph Frederick Wallet Des Barres*, both of which were privately printed.

The nineteen thirties also saw the publication of Dr. Webster's major historical works of book length, namely, *The Forts of Chignecto* (1930), *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst in America 1758-1763* (1931), Dièreville's *Relation du Voyage du Port Royal de l'Acadie ou de la Nouvelle France* (1933), *Acadia at the End of the Seventeenth Century* (1934), and *Thomas Pichon, the Spy of Beauséjour* (1937).

In the preface to *The Forts of Chignecto* Dr. Webster emphasized the link between the written word and the physical scene. "This book", he wrote, "is an endeavour to give a short survey of the important and stirring events of the past, of which the old forts of Chignecto will ever be a reminder".¹³ By this time Fort Beauséjour National Historic Park had been established and Dr. Webster was endeavouring to persuade the federal government to move to the next step, the establishment of a museum. It would be easy to suggest that the skirmishes in Chignecto were pretty small stuff, but they were, after all, North American history in microcosm. In de Vergor, scholar and general reader alike may recognize the corruption and venality of the last Intendant of New France, François Bigot; in Le Loutre he will realize the identification of religious faith and national identity that was, for so many years, the strength of French Canada; in Lawrence and Shirley he will recognize acquisitiveness and bigotry that was so much the history of New England. *The Forts of Chignecto* is not history in its vulgar or popular form; it is history drawn from contemporary sources. For the scholar much of the value of the book will be found in the wealth of material it contains in the form of journals and contemporary correspondence.

If *The Forts of Chignecto* was hopefully directed towards the general reader, *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst* was a book for the military historian. Dr. Webster was given a free hand by Amherst's descendant, Lord Amherst, and the journal was published complete and unexpurgated; it covers the career of General Jeffrey from his arrival in North America in 1758 to his departure. Amherst's name has always been obscured by that of Wolfe; in Canada we commemorate the English officer whose occupation of Montreal

13 J. C. Webster, *The Forts of Chignecto* (Shediac, 1930), p. 5.

in 1760 brought about the fall of New France, only by a small town in Nova Scotia. Canadians, like other people, are attracted by dramatic incidents and too frequently ignore the fact that quiet service may be more effective and durable. The Amherst journal throws a great deal of light, not only upon the military events of 1758 to 1760, but also upon Amherst as a man, his thoughtfulness and care of his troops, his watchful economy in the expenditure of public funds, his deliberation, one might even say excessive caution or stodginess, also upon his greed, his selfishness and his ambition. As in all of Webster's books, *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst* is embellished with interesting illustrations and with useful biographical notes.

The third volume, Diéreville's *Relation of the Voyage to Port Royal*, was published by the Champlain Society in Toronto. It is a translation — a beautifully done piece of work by Mrs. Webster — of the journal written by a young surgeon (is this why it appealed to the surgeon-historian, Dr. Webster?) describing, in prose and in verse, his voyage from La Rochelle to Port Royal in 1699. It is a chatty account, filled with the author's adventures and misadventures, interesting and revealing of the personality of the author and of the times in which he lived. More serious in character is the *Letters, Journals and Memoirs of Joseph Robineau de Villebon, Commandant of Acadia 1690-1700*, which was published under the title of *Acadia at the End of the Seventeenth Century*. Dr. Webster purchased the original de Villebon journal in France and published it with a short introduction tracing the history of Acadia from the Treaty of Whitehall in 1686 to the close of the seventeenth century. It is thoroughly annotated and documented and contains the usual set of biographical sketches. The usefulness of this book to the serious student is enhanced by the inclusion of the budget of Acadia during the régime of Ménéval, the census of 1686, descriptions of Chedabucto and Dr. W.F. Ganong's remarks on the Indians of Acadia and several sketch maps.

The final book, *The Spy of Beauséjour*, could very well have been the subject of a historical novel by Thomas Raddall or Will Bird. Thomas Pichon, a clever, plausible Frenchman of base character, came to Louisbourg in 1751. He published an account of his experiences which was pirated by a British publisher and appeared in English under the title of *Genuine Letters and Memoirs relating to Cape Breton and Saint John*. In 1753 Pichon went to Beauséjour where he served as a civilian in the stores department. He entered into traitorous correspondence with the British at Fort Lawrence. After the fall of the fort he went to England where he assumed the name of Tyrrell. In his book on Pichon, Dr. Webster includes a number of contemporary letters, including extracts from the letters of a certain Madame de Beaumont, who, at the age of 45, fell madly in love with Pichon. How the novelists have missed this study in sex-psychology is hard to understand.

This list does not exhaust Dr. Webster's historical publications, but it represents, at least in my opinion, his most significant contributions to Canadian

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historical studies. His autobiographical sketch, *Those Crowded Years 1863-1944*, published in 1944, was essentially a family document, even though he claimed in the foreword that it was “*in no sense a journal intime*”.¹⁴ *The River St. John* was a reprint in 1943, with added appendices and index, of W.O. Raymond’s book of the same title. Everything Dr. Webster wrote, as well as everything he did, was marked by diligence, enthusiasm and great care, and perhaps one might add, a sense of self-fulfilment. He once said of his friend William Francis Ganong that he was “never dominated by speculative tendencies”.¹⁵ The same was true of himself. He was essentially a fact finder. That is why his work seems, to some readers, to lack liveliness. His emphasis upon factual accuracy in the interests of truth has tended to obscure his basic desire to help people to enlarge their visions, to shake loose ancient prejudices, to attain intellectual and spiritual freedom. Edinburgh had been his road to Damascus and he wanted to carry the gospel to his own people. And yet those who knew Dr. Webster in the Royal Society of Canada and in the Canadian Historical Association, always felt that there was a high purpose behind his historical work, just as there had been behind his medical work. In his note on Dr. Webster, in the *Canadian Historical Review*, George Brown pointed out that “To Dr. Webster, history was not mere antiquarianism. It was a study to be pursued like medicine, with the highest standards of scholarship but in the general interest. Through it not only the scholar but the public at large might come to understand something of the past, and civic pride and patriotism in the best sense of the term might be encouraged . . . Few men in Canada have used history as effectively as Dr. Webster for the high purposes which he had in mind.”¹⁶

V

Dr. Webster’s role in Canada was by no means limited to collecting Canadiana, marking historic sites, building museums and publishing historical monographs. He also took an active part in the life of the maritime community. He served as president of the Shediac Board of Trade, as a member of the Board of Governors of Dalhousie University and as a member of the Royal Commission on Railways and Transportation. He was responsible for nominating Dr. D.C. Harvey as first Archivist of the Province of Nova Scotia; he commissioned the Canadian sculptor, Tait Mackenzie, to prepare the Webster Memorial Trophy for the encouragement of civil aviation in Canada,¹⁷ and chaired the local committee which welcomed General Italo Balbo when the

14 *Those Crowded Years*, p. 2.

15 J. C. Webster, “William Francis Ganong”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, XXXVI (1942), p. 91.

16 George W. Brown, “John Clarence Webster 1863-1950”, *Canadian Historical Review*, XXXI (1950), p. 216.

17 The trophy was withdrawn from competition after World War II.

Italian Air Armada flew across the Atlantic and landed twenty-four flying boats on the waters of the bay at Shediac on 13 July 1933.

For his historical and his public services Dr. Webster received many honours in his own day and generation. From King George V of Great Britain, he received the ribbon of a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George; from King Victor Emmanuel he received the cross of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus; from the President of the French Republic he received the medal of an Officer de l'Instruction Publique; and from the Mayor of Saint John he received the Freedom of the City. He was elected to Fellowships by the Royal Society of Canada, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Royal Society of Literature in the United Kingdom. Canadian historians recognized his contribution by choosing him as the president of the Canadian Historical Association, and his brother academicians approved his receiving the Tyrrell Medal for historical research. From Mount Allison, Dalhousie and New Brunswick, and from the Universities of Edinburgh and Cincinnati, he received honorary doctorates. And there were other honours.

All of these distinctions must have brought moments of satisfaction to the "laird of Shediac", but they were interspersed with moments of sadness. His elder son, John Webster, an enthusiastic airman, was killed when his light plane crashed at St. Hubert in 1931; and his daughter, Janet, who married a French artist, Camille Roche, was imprisoned by the Germans during the Second World War in Lubeck-Lauerhof and died before the end of hostilities in the women's prison at Ravensbruck. As a memorial, Mrs. Webster published her daughter's last letters in *Janet Webster Roche, Last Letters*. It is a very moving document.

When he wrote his short autobiographical sketch *Those Crowded Years*, Dr. Webster concluded it with the words, "May I always be remembered as one who, though conscious of many shortcomings, ever strove to follow the Biblical injunction, 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might'". It was his confession of faith, for his hand had always found something to do, whether it was with the scalpel or with the pen. To students interested in history, he was always kindly and helpful; but he would never have tolerated laziness. He disclaimed adherence to any school of philosophy, yet he accepted without question the Presbyterian Calvinist ethic of work in which he was raised. Despite his frail body — he was never a robust figure — he possessed anormous reserves of strength of will. There was no question but that he could have retired to Shediac in 1920 with fame and fortune in a sufficiency to enable him to enjoy a life of ease; but there was no question that he would ever do so. To Dr. Webster leisure was not a means of putting in time, but of employing it to do the things which the practice of his profession had hitherto prevented him from doing. On his eighty-first birthday, he wrote, "When I can no longer work I have no wish to live".¹⁸

18 *Those Crowded Years*, p. 2.

This drive which filled his life as it sustained his spirit, came originally from his Scottish and Yorkshire forbears, and from his education at school; it came too from the lasting impression made upon him at Edinburgh, when in his second year he saw and listened to Pasteur, Lister, Thomson and Hemholz, when they visited the university on the occasion of its tercentenary. To Webster, who admired great men, they were the intellectual giants, the Olympian gods of his day, and they had reached the pinnacles of fame not by good luck but by hard work. Work was the ethic he followed throughout his career; even his last days were spent revising the catalogue of his Canadiana in the New Brunswick Museum, and he continued to work to within an hour of his death, on March 16th, 1950. In a paper on Robert Louis Stevenson, Dr. Webster quoted George Meredith's *Vittoria* as singing,

Our life is but a little holding, lent
To do a mighty Labour; we are one
With heaven and the stars when it is spent
To serve God's aim; else die we with the sun.¹⁹

It was his own epitaph.

VI

JOHN CLARENCE WEBSTER'S LITERARY AND HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS

(A) *Books and Pamphlets*

1. *History in a Government House, Halifax, N.S.* A paper read before the Nova Scotia Historical Society, 1 April 1926. Privately printed, pp. 16, 1926.
2. *The Distressed Maritimes*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, pp. 48, 1926.
3. *Some Episodes in the Relations Between the Maritime Provinces and the American Atlantic States*. Privately printed, pp. 20, 1927.
4. *Wolfe Bicentenary Celebration*, London, 3 January 1927. Privately printed, pp. 10, 1927.
5. *Wolfiana; a pot-pourri of facts and fantasies culled from literature relating to the life of James Wolfe*. Shediac, privately printed, pp. 47, 1927.
6. *A History of Shediac*. Privately printed, pp. 24, 1928.
7. *Journal of Lieutenant Colonel William Amherst. The Recapture of St. John's, Newfoundland in 1762*. Privately printed, pp. 15, 1928.
8. *A Historical Guide to New Brunswick*. New Brunswick Government Bureau of Information and Tourist Travel, pp. 114, 1928, 1930, 1936, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1944.
9. *Samuel Vetch. An Address on the occasion of the Dedication of a Monument to Samuel Vetch, First British Governor of Nova Scotia*

¹⁹ *Edinburgh Memories*, p. 19.

- after the Conquest of 1710, at Fort Anne, Annapolis Royal, September 22nd, 1928. Privately printed, pp. 23, 1929.
10. *Cornelis Steenwyk, Dutch Governor of Acadia*. A paper read before the Canadian Historical Association, Ottawa, 22-23 May 1929. Privately printed, pp. 23, 1929.
 11. *The Forts of Chignecto, a Study of the Eighteenth Century Conflict between France and Great Britain in Acadia*. Saint John, Rapid-Grip Ltd., pp. iv, 142, 1930.
 12. *Wolfe and the Arts; a Study of his Portraiture*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press, pp. 74, 1930.
 13. *The Journal of Abijah Willard in the Expedition to Nova Scotia in 1755* Saint John, Collections of the New Brunswick Historical Society, No. 13, pp. 75, 1930.
 14. *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst in America, 1758-1763. With notes and a Study of Amherst's career*. Toronto, The Ryerson Press and Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, pp. xxiv, 341, 1931.
 15. *The Life of Charles des Champs de Boishébert*. Privately printed, pp. 38, 1931.
 16. *The Career of the Abbé Le Loutre in Nova Scotia*. Shediac, privately printed, pp. 50, 1933.
 17. *The Life of Joseph F.W. DesBarres*. Shediac, privately printed, pp. 70, 1933.
 19. *Acadia at the End of the Seventeenth Century, Letters, Journals and Memoirs of Joseph Robineau de Villebon, Commandant of Acadia, 1690-1700, and other contemporary documents*. Monographic Series No. 1, The New Brunswick Museum, Sackville, The Tribune Press, pp. xiv, 232, 1934.
 20. *The Siege of Beauséjour 1755. A Journal of the Attack on Beauséjour written by Jacau de Fiedmont*. Translated by Mrs. Alice Webster, Saint John, Historical Studies No. 1, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 40, 1936.
 21. *The Journal of Joshua Winslow*. Saint John, Historical Studies No. 2, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 40, 1936.
 22. *Journals of Beauséjour — Diary of John Thomas; Journal of Louis de Courville*. Halifax, Special Publication, The Public Archives of Nova Scotia, pp. 54, 1937.
 23. *The Life of Thomas Pichon "The Spy of Beauséjour", An Account of his Career in Europe and America, with many documents translated by Alice Webster*. Halifax, Special Publication, The Public Archives of Nova Scotia, pp. xvi, 161, 1937.
 24. *Catalogue, John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection (Pictorial Section)*. Volume I, Saint John. The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 368, 1939.

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25. *The Building of Fort Lawrence in Chignecto, 1750*. Saint John, Historical Studies No. 3, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 23, 1941.
 26. *Memorial on Behalf of the Sieur de Boishébert, Captain, Chevalier de Saint Louis, Former Commandant in Acadia*. Translated by Louise Manny, Saint John, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 42, 1942.
 27. *William Francis Ganong Memorial*. Saint John, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 31, 1942.
 28. *Edinburgh Memories and Robert Louis Stevenson*. Sackville, privately printed, pp. 19, 1943.
 29. Edited W.O. Raymond's *The River St. John*, Sackville. The Tribune Press, pp. 280, 1943.
 30. *Those Crowded Years 1863-1944, An Octogenarian's Record of Work*. Shediac, privately printed, pp. 51, 1944.
 31. *Catalogue, John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection (Pictorial Section)*. Volume II, Saint John, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 377, 1946.
 32. *Catalogue, John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection (Pictorial Section)*. Volume III, Saint John, The New Brunswick Museum, pp. 140, 1949.
- (B) *Articles in Periodicals*
1. "A visit to the Birthplace of James Wolfe", *The Canadian Magazine*, May, 1897.
 2. "Robert Louis Stevenson and Edinburgh", a paper read before the Caledonian Society, Montreal, 3 December 1897; published in the *Montreal Witness*, 18 December 1897.
 3. "French and English Pioneer Days in Acadia", *The Busy East*, January, 1922.
 4. "Present Day Aspects of Canadian Nationalism", an address delivered on Founder's Day, 15 November 1922, at Mount Allison University.
 5. "Does History Pay?" *The Morning Chronicle*, Halifax, 1 January 1922.
 6. "Sir Brook Watson, Friend of the Loyalists, First Agent of New Brunswick in London", read before the Nova Scotia Historical Society; published in *The Argosy*, Mount Allison University, Vol. III, No. 1, 1924.
 7. "Whistler and the Art of the Orient", read before the Chicago Literary Club; published in the *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. IV, No. 1, April, 1924.
 8. "A Study of the Portraiture of James Wolfe", *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XIX, 1925.
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 10. "Canadian Cultural Development", *Annual Report of the Canadian Historical Association*, 1927.
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12. "The Journal of William Amherst in America, 1758-1760", *Regimental Annual, Notts and Derby Regiment*, 1927.
13. "Life of John Montresor with his published journal of his Expedition to relieve Detroit in 1763", Presidential Address, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XXII, 1928.
14. "The First Published Life of James Wolfe", *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. XI, No. 4, December 1930.
15. "The Classics of Acadia", Presidential Address, Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report of the Canadian Historical Association*, 1933.
16. "The Chignecto Dry Dock: An undescribed French dock-like Structure on the La Coupe River", *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XXVII, 1933.
17. "The Story of New Brunswick", Fourteenth Edition, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1934.
18. "The Historical Renaissance in the Maritimes", Founder's Day Address at Mount Allison University, *The Mount Allison Record*, January-February 1937.
19. "Robert Laird Borden", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XXXII, 1938.
20. "Alleged Portrait of Madame de La Tour", *Le Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, Vol. XLV, No. 12, 1939.
21. "John Stewart McLennan", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XXXIV, 1940.
22. "William Francis Ganong", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XXXVI, 1942.