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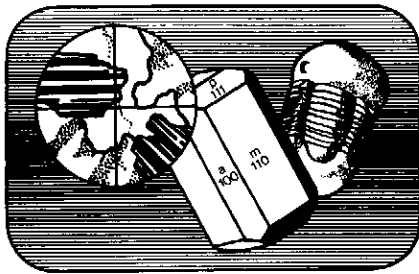
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Features



Education Feature

Geological Education at the Redpath Museum

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Redpath Museum is the centre for teaching and research in vertebrate paleontology at McGill University, and houses McGill's principal collections in paleontology and mineralogy. There are also extensive collections in zoology and anthropology.

The building was officially opened in 1882 with Sir William Dawson as its first Director. At the time it was considered to be the most modern museum building in North America designed specifically to display "natural history" specimens. When the first plans for the building were being sketched, Sir William Logan was Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, which was then located in Montreal. The Survey had established a very good small museum of its own, made up largely of specimens collected by Logan. Dawson and others involved in the planning used Logan as an able advisor and the university greatly benefitted from this.

When the university was small, it seemed quite desirable to combine exhibition and teaching of all the "natural sciences" in the same building. The Red-

path Museum Annual Report for 1889 stated that the museum collections were an integral part of the university teaching, "besides being of essential service to the public generally and the scientific travelers who may visit our city" (Clark and Turnham, 1950, p. 1).

During the early years of the museum's existence, members of the public were charged 25 cents, while students were admitted free. However, it was found that the cost of hiring a guard to collect a modest admission fee was greater than the money received, and the admission charge was dropped. This policy of free admission was continued until 1971, when the museum was closed to the public. It now continues strictly as part of the teaching functions of the relevant university departments.

The closing of the museum to the public was an administrative decision, made at a time when the university was under severe budgetary restraint. Although many staff members hoped that it might be possible to arrange space for university teaching and research and still allow public access, the increasing costs of guards and other service workers have caused the museum to remain closed to the public ever since.

This emphasis on university teaching has been both a problem and a challenge to the museum. The education department, which had been responsible for the tours of many groups of school children in the 1950s and 1960s, was closed in 1971. This freed museum staff members for their primary work of higher education. On the other hand, the expectations of university authorities at the time that governments would sponsor a new geological museum in Montreal proved to be unfounded, and a large population was left without access to a geological museum.

The popularity of the McGill Open House, held once every three years, shows the great interest that visitors still take in viewing the museum exhibits, even though the displays are now geared

to the university level. It is interesting and enlightening to see how much understanding members of the general public, and even small children, have when visiting geological exhibits of an advanced nature. The beauty of a fine zeolite and the authenticity of a well-preserved microsauro fossil seem to be appreciated by visitors of many ages and levels of learning.

All classes in vertebrate paleontology are given at Redpath Museum. The lectures are held in the museum lecture hall patterned after the medical theatres common in the nineteenth century, and reminiscent of the discussions concerning evolution in the days of Dawson, Lyell and Darwin. An outstanding vertebrate collection made by Dawson in Nova Scotia includes some of the earliest land animals known. Largely as a result of this nucleus, Redpath has become a world centre for the study of Paleozoic amphibians and reptiles.

The mineral collections are solidly based on specimens collected in the first half of the nineteenth century. When William Dawson came to McGill as Principal in 1855, he brought with him his personal collection of minerals. However, with a true curator's appreciation of valuable specimens, he did not deed them to the university until a suitable museum had been built to house them. Likewise, Dr. A.F. Holmes, co-founder of the Montreal General Hospital and the McGill University Faculty of Medicine, made an outstanding collection of local and worldwide minerals in the 1830s and 1840s, and presented them to the university when Redpath Museum was completed. Several other collections were acquired once the museum was established. Many of these specimens are from mines and quarries long since worked out or no longer accessible.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the main mineral reference collection was assembled by W.F. Ferrier, a geologist and mining engineer who graduated from McGill University in 1887.

Under the direction of Professor R.P.D. Graham, this was installed at Redpath Museum in 1913 and 1914.

In recent years the collections have been augmented by field work of staff, students and alumni, and by donations from interested collectors and members of the Montreal Gem and Mineral Club. There is a good collection from the quarries of Mont St. Hilaire, near Montreal, and from the Francon quarry within the Montreal city limits. Francon is notable as the locality where the new mineral, welo-ganite, was discovered and named in honour of Sir William Logan.

Certainly definite educational benefits accrue from having a location set aside for the preservation and display of important geological specimens. As Redpath Museum approaches its one-hundredth birthday, it looks forward to continuing a tradition of emphasizing excellence in geological studies.

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Reference

Clark, T.H. and A.J. Turnham, 1950, A Report of Progress, 1855-1950, McGill University Museums: Montreal, Que., 5 p.

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