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The Bell Affair

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[See table of contents](#)

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THE BELL AFFAIR

At the November Conference on the Study of the History of Canadian Science and Technology at Kingston, Prof Alan Richardson of Western Ontario told the conferees that the papers, both personal and scientific, of the geologist Robert Bell, one-time acting Director of the Geological Survey, were being sold at auction by Montreal Book Auctions. Investigation showed that these papers had once been offered to the Public Archives of Canada in the 1960s, but that the papers had, with a few exceptions, been returned to Bell's heirs. These papers were offered for sale last autumn. While some of the Bell papers have little value, many others are invaluable for the history of Canadian science.

The Conference participants sent a resolution to the Hon. John Roberts, Secretary of State, asking that these papers be retrieved and that a clear policy statement on the preservation of scientific and technical papers be enunciated.

What has been done? It required two letters to Mr Roberts to find out, but the editor has now learned that the Public Archives has been bidding for selected materials as they come up for sale, and that some papers are being held in Canada under the terms of the Cultural Property Export Review Board. Under this arrangement, materials are held in Canada to allow a Canadian institution or individual to come forward to purchase the material. Whether anyone has yet done so, we do not know. Mr Norman Ball, the archivist at the PAC in charge of scientific papers, says that the funds are not available to purchase all of the Bell Papers, but that he is trying to select the most important. Who will watch the watchers? Evidently, historians.

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