

Chapter Fifteen: Respected Scientist

Seismology

Will Sutton was interested in most branches of natural science including seismology which is not surprising given his background in geology. He was introduced to the latest equipment for measuring earthquakes at a meeting of the Natural History Society in April 1908 by Mr. F. Napier Denison,ⁱ a friend and collaborator who would be one of the pallbearers at Will's funeral.

Will's membership of the Natural History Society, Vancouver Island Development League and the Board of Trade often put him in a position where he could promote ideas, as we have already found with regard to provincial parks, timber conservation and transport systems. His interest in seismology was no different. At a meeting of the Board of Trade in October 1912, Will brought up the question of a seismological station or observatory at Victoria. He pointed out,

it had been demonstrated time and again that Victoria was peculiarly well situated for the recording of earthquakes and tremors. He did not ask the government representative to promise them a first class observatory but he thought that in view of the extremely valuable information that could be obtained here at a nominal expense it was but right that something should be done to encourage the work. What was wanted was more and better accommodation for the officer in charge of the work and more suitable locations for the instruments.ⁱⁱ

Will had already brought the issue to the attention of the dominion government at a meeting of the Canadian Mining Institute the month before:

Vancouver Island is in the seismic zone of the Pacific Coast, and it is well known that earth movements have been frequent here in recent geologic times. Hence the opportunities were particularly favourable for the conduct of investigations of this character. We have extensive coal mines on the island, and it certainly appears that there is a sympathetic relationship between earth strains and the outbursts of large volumes of gas. For this reason I consider it highly important that the Government should establish a well-equipped seismological station on this coast.

In 1916 a new Meteorological Station was built at Gonzales Heights, Victoria and the seismograph was moved to a pier in the basement of the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory.ⁱⁱⁱ Will's friend, F. Napier Denison played a large part in designing the new station and became its Director.

Royal Astronomical Society

The first centre for the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada was established in Ottawa in 1906 followed by Hamilton, Winnipeg, Regina and then, in 1914, Victoria. Will was one of its founding members. The first annual report of 1915 noted:

The Centre has suffered a serious loss by the death of Mr. W. J. Sutton, one of its Executive Committee, who was instrumental in forming the Centre. Mr. Sutton was a gentleman of scientific training, of broad mind and warm heart, whose loss cannot be estimated and whose good work can only be partly appreciated by the members of this Centre.

The Centre celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2014 and published *A Centennial History of the Victoria Centre, The Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*. The publication acknowledges the Centre was the result of ***“the energy and initiative of a few public-spirited men, notably Mr. F. Napier Denison, Mr. W.J. Sutton and Mr. W.A. McCurdy.”***

After considering sites for an observatory and telescope across Canada, it was decided to build on Little Saanich Mountain on Vancouver Island. It was the largest mirror in the world for six months! Thus for a short time, Victoria became the centre of the universe with worldwide newspapers following development of the new observatory.

Here is a photograph of the Victoria branch of the Society, it is one of the last photographs taken of Will:



Image Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, First Executive Committee, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

Back row, left to right: E. H. Cotterell, C.E.; Secretary-Treasurer; A. W. McCurdy; Vice-President; Major C. B. Simonds, C.E. Front row: W. J. Sutton, M.E.; Dr. J. S. Plaskett, P.R.A.S. of C., Honorary President; F. Napier Denison, President; G.G. Aiken.

At their meeting after Will's death, the Victoria branch carried, by a silent standing vote, the following resolution published in *The Colonist*:

Resolved, that an expression of deep sympathy be tendered to the family of the late Mr. W.J. Sutton, and, that in the passing away of the late Mr. Sutton, this society, and science in general, has suffered an irreparable loss. In the many branches of science with which he identified himself his energy and experience were potent factors towards success, and the gap that has been opened by his absence will be difficult to fill. Those who were acquainted with him feel that they have lost a true friend, and his name will long be cherished by the members of this society which he helped to form and of which he was a charter member.^{iv}

Similar motions were passed by the other societies Will belonged to, revealing the respect and admiration members had for him.

Natural History Society

At a special meeting of the Natural History Society members passed the following resolution:

Whereas our late member, W.J. Sutton, has been removed from our midst by his untimely death, and Whereas the deceased has been of inestimable value to the Natural History Society and to the community at large in matters of scientific research, and Whereas the deceased has served as president in the past and as a member of the

Executive Committee of the Natural History Society at the time of his death, in which capacities he rendered signal service to the society: “Be it resolved, that we, the officers and members of the Executive Committee of the Natural History Society hereby express our sorrow and grief that we shall no longer be privileged to avail ourselves of the counsels of our late comrade, and extend our heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved family:

Resolved, that the members of the Natural History Society be requested to attend the funeral in a body. Resolved, that copies of this resolution be transmitted to the grief-stricken family and to the press.”

Canadian Mining Institute

An obituary was included in the Canadian Mining Journal^{vi} and the following kind and appreciative letter of condolence sent to Annie from the Western Branch:

Dear Mrs. Sutton.

At a meeting of the members of the Western branch of the Canadian Mining Institute, held in Nelson on May 28, it was the unanimous wish of those present that I convey to you an assurance of their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss occasioned by the lamented death of your late husband, whom we were much pleased to look up to as our chairman. A resolution expressing the appreciation of our members of the valuable work Mr. Sutton did over the long series of years he devoted to the advancement of the knowledge of the geology of this country, and of his unremitting efforts to foster the utilization of its resources, especially of its mineral wealth, will be placed on the records of this branch of the Institute.

Please accept this message of condolence and sympathy in full confidence that it is not merely a formal record; rather it is an earnest and heartfelt tribute to the worth of one of our most valued members, and of our deep feeling for you and other loved ones from whom he was so suddenly taken. Believe me dear madam, Yours very truly, Secretary of Western Branch, C.M.I.^{vii}

Geological Society of America

William Fleet Robertson, provincial mineralogist and close friend of Will, was asked by the President of the Geological Society of America, Dr. R.W. Brock, to write a memorial for publication in its Bulletin. According to Fleet Robertson Will was,

a man of unusually strong physique and his death was probably due to heart failure, as he was never sparing of himself in his work, and there were few professional woodsmen who could keep pace with him through the dense forests.^{viii}

The full memorial can be found in Appendix F.

The Colonist

Naturally, we learn more about Will's death from *The Colonist*. It is featured on the front page of the 10th May edition, with a photograph. Their correspondent wired the following dispatch from Ucluelet:

W.J. Sutton dropped dead at 9 o'clock this morning while running a survey line for a road in process of construction. He and his party were at work at a point a mile and a half back in the bush. On news reaching here a party, consisting of sixteen men, including the life-saving crew, hurried to the scene, and the body was later

conveyed here. An inquest was held at noon, and a verdict of death from apoplexy returned. The body will be conveyed to Victoria tomorrow morning by special boat. Mr. Sutton had extensive holdings in this district and was universally esteemed.

Will's body arrived in Victoria on Sunday evening on the tug Olive, which was specially chartered. The article continued,

It is but the bare truth to say that his personal knowledge of the Island was greater than that of any other man. He had visited practically every section of it from Cape Scott to Victoria. His services were always at the disposal of those advancing plans for the further development of the Island by railways or otherwise, and on innumerable occasions he delivered lectures illustrated by specially drawn maps and lantern slides on the topographical features of the country and its mineral resources. He was ever extremely optimistic about the future of the Island, and especially was he firm in the belief that there would be great development on the West Coast. He possessed one of the finest and most comprehensive private mineral collections in the West.

...Mr. Sutton's reputation as a mineralogist was by no means local. He was known all over the continent and in Europe as an authority of Western Canada. He was a member of the American Institute of Mining Engineers, vice-president of the Canadian Mining Institute and chairman of the Western branch, a Fellow of the Royal Geological Society of London.

While never seeking anything in the nature of public honors, Mr. Sutton's strenuous duties in the field

permitted him to give time to congenial tasks in the interests of the country. Thus he was a very active member of the Board of Trade and the Vancouver Island Development League; and it was only a few weeks ago that he spent much time in assisting in the work of re-organising the latter body. He was one of the foremost members also of the Natural History Society, of which he for some time held the office of president.

...He was constantly seeking to enrich his store of knowledge, and being of a very observant turn of mind, his experiences proved very profitable. Of a most attractive and winning personality, he was a delightful raconteur, and he will be greatly missed by a circle of close friends who spent many happy hours in his company.

Even the Children's Section of the newspaper on 17th May included a short story about Will's death:

...Those who knew Mr. Sutton best say that there was no one left who is so well fitted to give information or advice on matters connected with this Island. How many boys are there who are trying to find out anything about the geography, the rocks, the plants and the fishes of Vancouver Island? How many have any idea of the amount of land fit for cultivation? These are some of the things Mr. Sutton used to talk about.

Funeral

Will was buried on 14th May; of course, *The Colonist* reported the event:

Save for an exceptionally large attendance of sorrowing friends, who thus paid a last tribute to a pioneer citizen

who was held in the highest esteem, the funeral of the late Mr. William J. Sutton, who suddenly succumbed to a stroke of apoplexy on Saturday morning at Ucluelet, which took place yesterday afternoon, was marked by a simple and dignified solemnity peculiarly in keeping with the character of the deceased.

Although no flowers had been requested there were several beautiful designs and wreaths sent from the council of the Canadian Mining Institute and from the Western branch of the Institute. The cortege left 749^{ix} Discovery Street at 2.30 to Christ Church Cathedral. Services were conducted by Rev. R. Connell and Rev. W. Barton; the Lord Bishop of Columbia was also in attendance. There was only one hymn, “*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*”^x with Mr. Pauline, the organist, rendering the *Dead March* from “Saul.”

The whole membership of the Natural History Society attended as well as several members of the local branch of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. The pallbearers were: Honorary: Captain C.E. Clarke (Ucluelet Mercantile Company); J.R. Lockard (Canadian Collieries); his brother-in-law, the Rev. F.H. Fatt; F. Napier Denison (Royal Astronomical Society, Victoria); A.S. Barton (Natural History Society); and C.R. Lugin (Board of Trade).

Active: A.W. McCurdy (Royal Astronomical Society), W. Fleet Robertson (Provincial Mineralogist), Joseph Hunter (Canadian Collieries), Guy Langton (Canadian Collieries), F. Hewlings and C.C. Pemberton (Natural History Society).

Grave

Will's grave can be found in Ross Bay Cemetery (along with Annie) under a large copper beech tree, it is the three tiered memorial, unfortunately the cross missing.



Will and Annie's Grave, Ross Bay Cemetery, © Leona Taylor

Gone but not Forgotten?

Will's actions during his lifetime - even some of his negative ones - have left an enduring impact. It was wrong to rob the graves of First Nation people but in so doing, Will and his brother helped Franz Boas challenge the assumptions previously held of innate racial inferiority: Boas insisted that culture, not nature, explained differences between people of the world. In *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, 1963, Thomas Gossett wrote, ***"it is possible that Boas did more to combat race prejudice than any other person in history."***

Will's photograph of Kitwanga (Gitwangak) has shown that the famous painting by Emily Carr was painted at Gitwangak on the Skeena River and not, as previously

labelled, at Queen Charlotte Islands. The Art Gallery of Ontario have now taken off Queen Charlotte Islands but it would be even better if they were to replace it with Skeena River. And we have several other photographs to celebrate some First Nation villages that were, until now, hidden within the Royal British Columbia Museum Archives.

Although he was unsuccessful in his campaigns to establish a mining school in British Columbia, a university in Victoria and a building/museum for the Natural History Society in Victoria, he left his stamp in other ways. In the five years he was at the Michigan School of Mines Will would have helped shape many more geologists who would have gone on to explore the wonderful natural resources of North America. His prized mineral collection formed the basis of the University of British Columbia's Geological Museum, now known as the Pacific Museum of Earth and he added significantly to the knowledge of Canadian mineral occurrences.

His support for locating the seismology station in Victoria may have helped to save lives – since its installation there have been twelve earth quakes on or near Vancouver Island.

His influence through the Natural History Society, Vancouver Island Development League and Board of Trade certainly helped to promote Vancouver Island to the world and his support for a provincial park helped to secure the natural beauty of Strathcona Park for people to enjoy today.

In the years he pursued his father's ambitions in the timber trade many trees would have been felled, but this experience, and his observations of the different kinds of trees, their habitats and growth patterns, led him to campaign

for more careful forest management, reforestation, forest conservation and, ultimately, the establishment of better government control of logging.

Fleet Robertson tells us Will had planned to take retirement and

devote his time to the preparation of his geological and mineralogical data for publication and had practically arranged ... that such should be done, under the auspices of the British Columbia Bureau of Mines...Mr. Sutton's death is a great loss to scientific investigation in British Columbia, where devotees to science are few, and it seems a great pity that he was unable to leave more published records of his store of information.^{xi}

It was, indeed, a great pity because if Will had managed to publish his extensive knowledge he would, perhaps, have been better remembered. His name lives on, however, in Sutton Pass; Sutton Limestones;^{xii} Sutton Creek Boulders; Sutton Mill Creek; Sutton Road, Port Albion; and Sutton Rock.^{xiii} At one time there was even a Sutton trail and Sutton Lake.^{xiv} As local west coast historian Ken Gibson said, *“The story of ...[Will’s] impact would fill a book.”*^{xv}

What better way to conclude the Will Sutton story than with a poem written and dedicated to him by F.M. Kelly, published in *The Colonist* on 13th May 1914:

THE TRAIL BREAKERS

We were not hampered with the thoughts
Of Money-making schemes;
Nor were the hopes that couraged us
Conceived of idle dreams:

Immutably we went our ways
Through forests vast and still,
Content to walk with destiny
And serve the Master's will.

We have watched the stars of morning
Fade away between the firs;
In our sodden blankets shivered
On the wind-swept mountain spurs.
Gave Old Death a chance to wonder
What our spirits wouldn't dare,
When we passed him on the rapids
With a narrow inch to spare.

We have sweltered on the rock-slides
In the glamor of the sun;
Never faltered in our purpose
Till the bleak divide was won,
Till we saw the peaks above us
By the soft-toned vapors kissed,
And the stunted jack-pines standing
Ever ghostly in the mist.

We have glimpsed the beaver cutting,
Known the structure of its house;
Heard the bird of evil croaking,
And the "drumming" of the grouse;
Seen the silver'd salmon leaping
Up the dancing water-fall;
Marked the wild-fowl from the sedge
At the feeding hour call.

We have jumped the gentle black-tail
From its cover in the brake;
Caused the she-bear in the windfall

From her slumber to awake;
Seen the stealthy cougar questing
In the quickly fading light;
Caught the yelping of the wolf-pack
In the watches of the night.

We have rafted lakes of wonder
With our paddles going strong;
Stirred the echoes in the timber
With many a lusty song;
Played the game of man's advancement,
All the strength of Nature fought
Till we won a place of resting
And the guerdon we had sought.

We were not hampered with the thoughts
Of money-making schemes;
Nor were the hopes that couraged us
Conceived of idle dreams:
Immutably we went our ways
Through forests vast and still,
Content to walk with destiny
And serve the Master's will.

ⁱ The Colonist 28th April 1908.

ⁱⁱ The Colonist, 2nd October 1912.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, Vol XLIX, No 4, July-August 1955, Whole Number 415, p. 141.

^{iv} 6th June 1914

^v The Colonist, 13th May 1914.

^{vi} Volume 35, January 1st 1914 to December 31st 1914, Mines Publishing Co. Ltd., Toronto.

^{vii} 6th June 1914.

^{viii} William Fleet Robertson, Memorial to W.J. Sutton Geological Society of America, Bulletin, Volume 27, 1917.

^{ix} Clearly the numbering had been changed. There are no longer houses on this street.

^x An appropriate hymn: Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame, from everlasting, thou art God, to endless years the same.

^{xi} Robertson *ibid*.

^{xii} At the meeting in January 1915 Rev. E. Connell gave a geology lecture during which he highlighted a group of rocks that the Society would be specially interested in: ***“the Sutton limestones, really marbles, named after the late present of the society, Mr. W. J. Sutton.”*** *The Colonist*, 13th January 1915.

^{xiii} Andrew Scott, *The Encyclopedia of Raincoast Placenames*, Harbour Publishing, 2009.

^{xiv} Extract from Report of the Minister of Mines, 1917: The Sutton Lake District is situated south-westerly of Ladysmith, on the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway, and is so named because the late William Sutton several years ago constructed a trail from Ladysmith to Nitinat lake, on the west side of Vancouver island, passing en route a fair-sized lake about eight miles from Ladysmith, which has been called Sutton lake ever since by the prospectors, but is called Coronation lake on the geological maps. At Sutton lake a trail called the Majuba trail branches off towards the south, while the main or Sutton trail continues towards the south-west.

^{xv} Personal email, 14th July 2014.