

ronmental and conservation issues. The authors seem to take an uncritical approach towards some controversial control programs undertaken by the local Department of Conservation against species introduced to New Zealand by people, over the centuries. It is somewhat unsettling, for example, to read about the “Herculean aerial poisoning operation” – “the largest rodent control program ever undertaken anywhere in the world”, on the same page where the authors refer to the “humane integrity” associated with the conservation initiatives such massive poisoning operations are a part of. It should perhaps have been mentioned, for example, that such massive poisoning operations can occasionally backfire, and affect rare native species as well. For instance, poisons used to eradicate mice also killed the North Island saddleback, a rare New Zealand native forest bird (Davidson and Armstrong 2002). Also, the magnitude of the effects of introduced herbivores on New Zealand’s native plants can sometimes be difficult to determine (Veblen and Stewart 1982). In addition, it is worth noting that some species, such as the swallows and silvereyes mentioned by De Roy and Jones, expanded their ranges naturally into New Zealand in recent times. When it comes to the many interactions among introduced species and their new environments, the story is often considerably more complex than this book suggests. Thus, the repeated demonization of introduced species found in the text is often overly simplistic.

The authors often mention the negative impact of introduced wild mammals such as rats or Australian brush-tailed possums in New Zealand, but, curiously, seem to largely ignore the huge impact of New Zealand’s domestic animals, particularly the country’s enormous sheep population. According to Ponting (1993), there are more than 70 million sheep and 8 million cattle in New Zealand, and many of the habitats of this country have been changed drastically and

irreversibly as a result. Also largely ignored in the book is a discussion of the early, pre-European, human-caused species extinctions. New Zealand’s fauna used to be dominated by very large (the largest ones reached 3 meters in height) flightless birds called moa. These birds became extinct mainly due to overhunting by the Maori – the country’s first human colonizers (Ellis 2004). The disappearance of the moas had important effects on some of the native plant species these giant birds were browsing on and had coevolved with. Thus, although conservation is, of course, a very important goal, it is also essential to recognize that nature is dynamic, and that the initial, pre-human colonization web of life found in New Zealand long ago can no longer be re-created due to the many irreversible changes that have taken place since then. A much more thorough and detailed discussion of New Zealand’s prehistoric life and ecology can be found in the book by Worthy and Holdaway (2002).

Despite the shortcomings, the current work by De Roy and Jones represents a nice introduction to the unique natural world of this fascinating and remote country.

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#### MISCELLANEOUS

### Beneath My Feet: The Memoirs of George Mercer Dawson

By Phil Jenkins. McClelland & Stewart, Toronto. 2007 Hardcover. 350 pages. 18 photographs, 6 sketches. \$34.99.

Phil Jenkins set out to write the biography of George M. Dawson, the son of Sir John William Dawson, the first principal and then first president of McGill University. Jenkins has instead taken nearly 5000 of George Dawson’s letters, most of them previously unpublished, from the McGill University archives, and has wisely allowed Dawson to write his own “autobiography.” Jenkins has created an introduction in Dawson’s style, has abridged an article published by Dawson in *Harper’s Magazine*, and has written over 5% of the text (we don’t know which segments) to fill in gaps not available in Dawson’s own words. The result is a personal,

frank, well-written, entertaining life of George M. Dawson, CMG, LLD.

A designer, “Mr. Richardson” (unaccountably, Jenkins does not provide his first name) has produced a charming book cover that fits perfectly with what would have been expected in the 1890s.

George M. Dawson was crippled in late childhood by spinal tuberculosis which left him a hunchback and a good foot shorter than he should have been. Nevertheless as an adult he struggled manfully through arduous hiking, canoeing and horseback riding that would have deterred many men of normal stature. He obtained superb training at the Royal School of Mines in London, England, where he was taught by Professor

Thomas Henry Huxley, a leading proponent of Darwin's theory of evolution. Young George was favourably inclined to Huxley's views and had spirited discussions on the subject with his father.

George M. Dawson was a geologist, author, teacher, civil servant, anthropologist, palaeontologist, surveyor, mapper, photographer, artist and poet. A number of his photographs, sketches, and poems are interspersed throughout this book. Although he was named geologist and naturalist to the North American Boundary Commission in 1873-74, his skills in natural history were weak (Jenkins fails to share this fact). In northern Montana, just south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, he observed the last great herds of Bison and came across skeletons resulting from the slaughter of 21 plains Indians. Dawson named a number of geographic features in the Queen Charlotte Islands and the interior of British Columbia that are still in use today. He suffered the pain of unrequited love and remained a bachelor until his premature death from an acute chest infection at age 51.

I agree with Jenkins (page 2), that Dawson was "a writer ... of endearing wit, evocative description, and illuminating fact." He described an Orkneyman in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company as "an amiable Hudson Bay Fossil." He used the term "liquid excisable articles" to describe spirituous liquors.

This book has not achieved its full potential. I spotted the following misspellings and factual errors, presumably made by Dawson and not by Jenkins: alumni (when alumnus was indicated), latitude (when longitude was meant), astrological (astronomical), peninsular (peninsula), tit bits (tid bits), 100<sup>th</sup> meridian (110<sup>th</sup> meridian), prairie chickens (Sharp-tailed Grouse), Dr Helckin (Dr Helmcken), F.R.C. (F.R.S.), silver load (silver lode), and Bearing Sea (Bering Sea). There is

little doubt that a University press would have encouraged Jenkins to insert the correct spellings in square brackets, as well as to include an index, explanatory footnotes (e.g., to add the initials and explain the importance of Dr. W. F. Tolmie, surgeon to the Hudson's Bay Company), and a bibliography. The latter would have included *Life and Letters of George Mercer Dawson, 1849-1901*, by Lois Winslow-Spragge, Dawson's niece, and would have listed the available photocopies of Dawson's detailed field notebooks which Jenkins seems to have ignored. Similarly, we are not told that Sapper Duckworth was Dawson's collector and taxidermist in 1873-74, that white cranes were Whooping Cranes, that the blue jay was probably a Steller's Jay, that the hummingbird nest was likely that of a Rufous Hummingbird, and that the name of the destructive but now extinct Rocky Mountain Locust has since changed from *Caloptenus spretus* to *Melanoplus spretus*.

A longer introductory essay or a postscript could have allowed a more complete assessment of Dawson's great achievements which Dawson modestly did not mention. We learn, for example, that Dawson received an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto, but those from Princeton, Queen's and McGill, and other high honors, are not mentioned.

In spite of the shortcomings mentioned, Dawson's skills make this book a treasure, a lasting contribution to Canadian history. I recommend it highly to the general public. It deserves a place in every university and high school library.

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## The Wolf Totem

By Jiang Rong. 2004. Changjiang Literary Art Press. Pages: 478; \$18. Yuan RMB.

[*Editors note:* The Penguin Group, under the British Pearson Education Company, bought the copyright and will publish an English version in 2007. This researched-based novel has topped China's bestseller list for 16 straight months, selling about 1 million copies.]

The Chinese press has not published a significant book in many years. However, in April of 2004, the Changjiang Literary Art Press of China published the novel-style book *The Wolf Totem*, which was written by an author bearing the pseudonym Jiang Rong. The response from the media and the public was rapid and it became a best seller.

The book is composed of various relatively independent stories. The narration of each story is full of craftsmanship, firing one's imagination and stirring one's emotion. The novel-style book is a marvellous,

unprecedented way to present many stories of the enigmatic animal of the steppe, the wolf. The stories are not only charming in their sense of humanity, but also colourful and valuable in their understanding of the ecological role played by the Wolf. After reading the book, readers will be enlightened, moved and even shocked by the vivid ecological ethics conveyed in the book. The publication of the book can be regarded as an important event for both literature and ecologists.

From the viewpoint of ecology, a steppe may be regarded as a special type of ecosystem seemingly simple in structure and function, but essentially diverse, complicated and unpredictable. From the perspective of humanity, a boundless steppe may be mysterious, thought inspiring and soul stirring, sometimes touching and sometimes plaintive. In the cultural evolutionary history of the world, the acted steppe as an endless well-spring of artistic creation and a boundless field for sci-