

Dominion Land Surveyors and Arctic Sovereignty in the Early 20th Century

By Shelagh D. Grant

Concerns over Canada's title to the Arctic Islands mounted in the 1890s following reports of American whalers wintering over in both the western and eastern Arctic. Apart from an expedition to Hudson Strait and Cumberland Sound in 1897, further response was delayed as a result of a more serious threat to Canadian sovereignty arising from the discovery of gold in the Yukon and the dispute over the Alaska boundary. On this issue, the Ministry of the Interior relied heavily on the advice of senior Dominion Land Surveyors who had worked in the region. Yet again in 1920, a seemingly disproportionate number were called upon once more for advice when government officials faced a potential threat to Canada's title over the Arctic Islands.¹ This article identifies who they were and how they had developed their expertise.

While many Canadians are aware of the role played by the Dominion Land Branch in opening the west for settlement, few have considered the attraction of surveying the Alaska/Yukon boundary for young men with a penchant for wilderness exploration and applied science. Moreover, because of joint surveys, many were familiar with their American counterparts. Surveyors such as William Ogilvie and William Dawson are legendary in the history of the Yukon, but less celebrated figures also rose through the professional ranks to attain senior positions in the Canadian civil service. A few developed a keen interest in Arctic sovereignty issues, whereas members of the Geological

Survey were understandably more interested in mineral and other resource potential, as were Ontario Land Surveyors.

The link between the Alaska boundary dispute and Arctic sovereignty concerns is best personified in the life work of Dr. William Frederick King, DLS, who in 1903 assisted Minister of the Interior Hon. Clifford Sifton in preparing the Canadian claim for the Alaska Boundary Tribunal in London, England. As a result of discussion while aboard ship that spring, Sifton asked King to prepare a full report on the status of Canada's title to the Arctic Islands, even though he had already arranged for the establishment of three new Northwest Mounted Police detachments that summer, two in the western Arctic and one at Fullerton Harbour on Hudson Bay.

Of all the Dominion Land Surveyors, Dr. W. F. King stands apart for his contribution to the understanding of Canada's "imperfect title" to the Arctic Islands.

Born in 1854, King had emigrated from England at the age of eight and settled with his family at Port Hope, Ontario. After three years at the University of Toronto, he took leave in 1872 and spent two years as a sub-assistant astronomer on the HBM Boundary Commission that oversaw the survey of the 49th parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. Returning to university in December 1874, he graduated the following year with a Bachelor of Arts, a gold medal in mathematics and an enviable record as an outstanding scholar.

In 1876, King was granted status as a Dominion Land Surveyor and the first to become a Dominion Topographical Surveyor. Known for his integrity, intellect and analytical mind, he quickly advanced through the ranks of the civil service until appointed Chief Astronomer in 1890. He also served on a long list of boundary commissions, was attached to the Joint High Commission in 1898-99 as an expert on boundaries, and was the founder and director of both the Dominion Observatory and the Geodetic Survey of Canada. Particularly relevant to this study were the two commissions created to survey the southern and northern Alaska boundary (1904-17), headed by Dr. W.F. King for Canada and O. Tittman for the United States.

In 1904, King was conferred with an LLD by the University of Toronto, for his work on the Alaska boundary. A colleague at the Dominion Observatory wrote that "his very reticence, modesty and lack of self-assertion combined to make knowledge of his work and achievements thoroughly



Photo of J.D. Craig DLS and Thomas Riggs Jr. LLS setting the Alaska-Yukon boundary at the Arctic Ocean, July 1913. Alaska State Library, Early Prints of Alaska Photograph Collection, P297-280

known only to the few who had the privilege of working with him”—perhaps explaining why his name is relatively unknown to most Canadians.²

In terms of Arctic sovereignty, King’s major contribution was his confidential *Report on the Title of Canada to the Islands North of Mainland Canada*, submitted to Clifford Sifton as a draft copy in 1904 and published the following year for limited distribution among senior members of parliament, senate, and ministry officials. In his conclusion, King wrote that “Canada’s title to some at least of the northern islands is imperfect,” and might “be best perfected by exercise of jurisdiction where any settlements exist.”³ Unfortunately, the most vulnerable islands were uninhabited.

As an interim measure, a series of four expeditions were sent to the High Arctic from 1904 to 1911. The first was commanded by A.P. Low of the Geological Survey on a chartered vessel *SS Neptune*. The others were led by Captain E. J. Bernier aboard the newly purchased government ship *CGS Arctic*. In each case, stone cairns were erected at strategic locations and a flag was raised, accompanied by declarations of Canadian sovereignty.

With the defeat of the Liberal government in the fall of 1911, this series of expeditions ended. Instead, the Conservative government funded the more comprehensive Canadian Arctic Expedition (1914-18) led by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, which resulted in extensive scientific studies and the discovery of previously uncharted islands west of Ellesmere. On his return, and hoping to obtain government funding for his proposed reindeer farm, Stefansson initiated correspondence with J.B. Harkin as Commissioner of Dominion Parks, with the warning that parties from Knud Rasmussen’s trading post in northern Greenland were hunting musk-ox on Ellesmere Island and threatening their extinction. Still receiving no support for his proposal or for further explorations, Stefansson requested a meeting of government officials to discuss the proposed Danish Fifth Thule Expedition led by Rasmussen, which he described as a serious threat to Canada’s sovereign title to the Arctic Islands.

A special meeting of the Advisory Technical Board (ATB) reporting to the Department of the Interior was arranged on 2 October 1920 to hear Stefansson’s concerns. This resulted in the creation of a special sub-committee to investigate and advise necessary action. Members of this sub-committee included four Dominion Land Surveyors: Dr. E.G. Deville as chair, Dr. O.J. Klotz as vice-chair, J.J. McArthur, and N.J. Ogilvie, as well as two others, J.B. Harkin as secretary and F.C.C. Lynch, Superintendent of the Natural Resources



W.F. King - W.J. Topley Collection, Library and Archives of Canada – A067092

Intelligence Branch of the department of the interior. Notable by his absence was Dr. King, who had passed away in 1916. That December, yet another Dominion Land Surveyor, John Davidson Craig, would be appointed “Advisory Engineer” attached to the Northwest Territories Council under the department of the interior, with instructions to take over “the sovereignty file” and supervise preparations for an expedition to Ellesmere Island.⁴ All of the above surveyors had been directly or indirectly involved in the Alaska boundary dispute.

Dr. Edouard Gaston Deville, who chaired the special committee, had been a close colleague of Dr. King, had held the position of the Surveyor General since 1885, and was likely considered the next best informed on

the subject of boundaries and international law. Born in France in 1849, he immigrated to Canada at the age of 25. In 1878 he was commissioned as both a Dominion Land Surveyor and a Dominion Topographical Surveyor. His innovative technology in using photography for mapmaking, especially of the Canadian Rockies, was adopted by the Geological Survey and later the International Boundary Commission. Deville also received an honorary degree from the University of Toronto in 1905, a year after King.

Vice-chair of the special committee, Dr. Otto J. Klotz, was also a close colleague of both King and Deville. Born in Ottawa in 1852 and with secondary schooling in Galt, he went on to study civil engineering in Ann Arbor, Michigan.



Map of Franklin District showing Arctic Islands claimed by Canada in 1911, LAC-R11981-53-5-E



Dr. Edouard Gaston Deville - AOLS Archives

In 1877, he too had qualified as a Dominion Land Surveyor and two years later as a Dominion Topographical Surveyor. His first hand experience in the Arctic occurred in 1894, when he led an overland party from Saskatchewan to the mouth of the Nelson River on Hudson Bay. Then in 1898, he was sent on a confidential mission to London and St. Petersburg to obtain information on the Alaska boundary. In 1904, Klotz also received an honorary degree from the University of Toronto and in 1917 succeeded King as Chief Astronomer and the following year as a Director of the Dominion Observatory.

The two other Dominion Land Surveyors on the special sub-committee were James. J. McArthur and Noel J. Ogilvie. McArthur was born in Aylmer, Quebec in 1856 and was known for his mountaineering feats while surveying the Canadian Pacific Railway line through the Rockies. In 1917, he was also a member of the boundary commission responsible for surveying the Alaska-Yukon border and a co-author of the commission's report that year. Noel Ogilvie, on the other hand, was a relative newcomer on the scene. Born in Hull in 1880, he was related to the famous William Ogilvie and had worked on the Canada-Alaska boundary (1909-14). He also worked as an assistant to King and in 1917 replaced him as Superintendent of the Geodetic Survey.

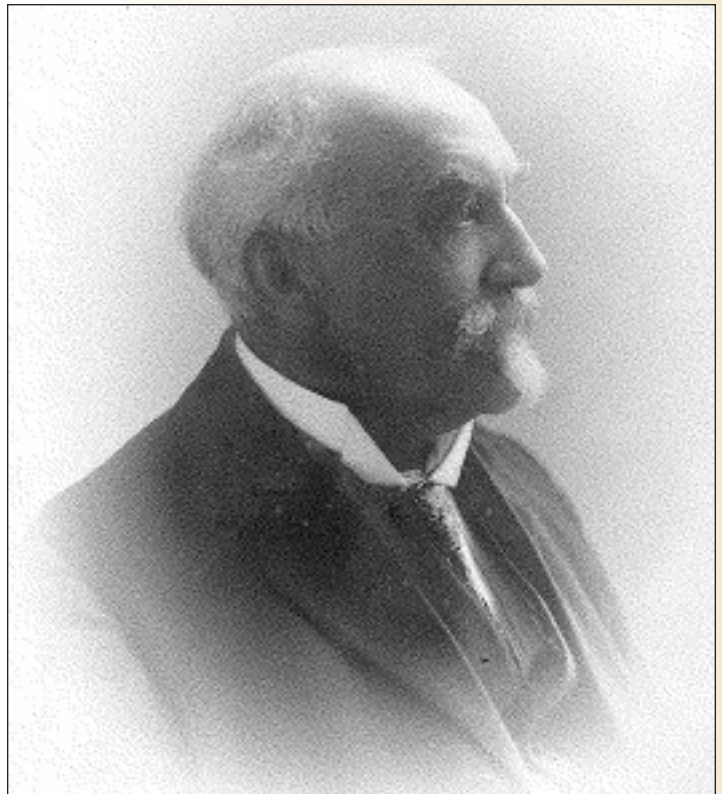
Of the two non-surveyors on the special committee, J.B. Harkin requires special mention, as it was through him that

Stefansson initially communicated his concerns and kept in contact with government officials. Although Stefansson's warnings subsequently proved to be exaggerated and blatantly self-serving, at the time they were taken seriously. Harkin's appointment as secretary was particularly appropriate given his early career as an investigative journalist and subsequent appointment as political assistant to the Hon. Clifford Sifton, allowing him first hand knowledge of the minister's involvement in the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal and King's report on the Arctic Islands.

As secretary, Harkin prepared a number of lengthy reports on the importance of Ellesmere Island and the vulnerability of its title. In October and November 1920, the sub-committee reported weekly to the ATB on their findings, concluding in a report to the department with the suggestion, among other options, that RCMP posts should be built on Ellesmere and other islands in the eastern Arctic, supplied annually by a government expedition.

After a report from Loring Christie as legal advisor to External Affairs concurred, arrangements were made in December to proceed with this option under strict secrecy, at which time J.D. Craig was appointed as "Advisory Engineer" to oversee the project. Unlike Harkin, who relied on reports derived from sources available to him through departments represented on the ATB, Craig dug deeper into the legal ramifications, seeking additional information from the department of justice, Privy Council, and from British documents and maps which had not been available to King.

Once he determined that the vague boundaries described in the transfer of the Arctic Islands were because of competing



Dr. Otto J. Klotz - AOLS Archives

discovery claims by American explorers, the more recent explorations by foreigners could no longer be ignored. The objective in 1921 was to provide effective administration of the most vulnerable regions in accordance with international law and ahead of other countries with competing discovery claims. The consensus was that this would be best accomplished by establishing additional police posts in the Arctic Islands as evidence of “effective occupation,” along with an annual supply patrol which might be described as an extension of the A.P. Low and Bernier expeditions to avoid raising public curiosity as to their purpose.⁵

The full story of why the government expedition and construction of the new RCMP detachments were delayed until 1922 is too complicated to relate here, except that Craig was appointed commander of the first two expeditions now referred to as the Eastern Arctic Patrol, before returning to his work with the boundary commissions. In the end, five new




J.D. Craig, as Commander of the Eastern Arctic Patrol in 1922, John D. Craig Collection, LAC – PA210045

police posts were built in the eastern Arctic: at Craig Harbour on Ellesmere Island, Dundas Harbour on Devon Island, and at Pond Inlet, Pangnirtung and Lake Harbour on Baffin Island.

Significantly Craig was the only Dominion Land Surveyor to be included in the 1925 committee struck to deal with yet another challenge to Canada’s title to the

Arctic Islands, this time from the United States Navy. Referred to as the Northern Advisory Committee, this confidential body was chaired by W.W. Cory as Deputy Minister of the Interior, with Dr. O.D. Skelton as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs assuming the chair in his absence. Aside from Craig and Harkin, members now included the RCMP Commissioner and senior officials of all key departments involved in northern affairs.

In 1925, J.D. Craig was appointed as Canadian Commissioner of the new Canada/U.S. International Boundary Commission (IBC), a permanent body created by the Treaty of Washington. This body essentially replaced the need for the numerous boundary commissions initially established under the Jay Treaty of 1794, then by subsequent treaties or conventions. The first American commissioner appointed to the IBC was Thomas C. Riggs Jr., Craig’s co-leader on the joint survey of the northern portion of the Alaska-Yukon boundary. Equally significant was the fact that upon Craig’s death in 1931, he was replaced by Noel J. Ogilvie. The function of the IBC has been described as “operational, regulatory, advisory, and custodial,” and credited with having successfully avoided potential conflicts along Canada/U.S. borders for over 80 years.⁶

Some historians have suggested that Canadian officials in 1920 were unprepared and confused as to what action was required to establish firm title to the islands of the High Arctic. Perhaps it appeared so on the surface, but thanks to the professional expertise and insightful analysis of senior Dominion Land Surveyors, especially Dr. W. F. King and later J.D. Craig, key officials knew full well what was required to protect Canada’s title. What seemed more difficult was convincing their political masters that the financial costs to achieve the goal were essential if Canada was to maintain control over its sovereign rights in the Arctic – a problem still experienced today. 

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Other Suggested Readings:

- Lewis Green, *The Boundary Hunters: Surveying the 141st Meridian and the Alaskan Panhandle*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982
- James G. MacGregor, *Vision of an Ordered Land: The Story of the Dominion Land Survey*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981
- Don W. Thomson, *Men and Meridians: Volume 2*. Ottawa: Information Canada, 1972

¹ Additional information and archival references for this article are found in two of my books: *Polar Imperative: A History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010: pp. 193-246; and *Arctic Justice: On Trial for Murder, Pond Inlet 1923*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002: pp. 24-30, 95-186.

² J. S. Plaskett, “W. F. King,” *The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, Vol. X, No. 6 (July-August 1916), 270.

³ Dr. W. F. King, “Report upon the Title of Canada to the Islands North of the mainland of Canada.” Marked confidential, a copy of the printed report dated 1905 may be found in LAC, J.D. Craig Papers, MG30 B57, vol. 1, file “Reports and Memos.”

⁴ Craig reported to the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, W.W. Cory, who was also Deputy Minister of the Department of the Interior.

⁵ Most memos and reports connected with the investigations and planning for the project are found in the J.D. Craig Papers, the J.B. Harkin Papers, MG30 E169, Vol. 1 and in RG 85 Vol. 583, File 571, parts 1, 2, and 3. For reference to the proposed expedition as an extension of the A.P. Low and Bernier expeditions, see all the above: memo from Harkin to Cory, 4 December 1920.

⁶ Alex McEwen, “The Value of International Boundary Commissions: The Canadian/American Experience,” paper prepared and presented by the Canadian International Boundary Commissioner at a conference on International Boundary Management, IBRU, University of Durham, UK, (September 2001). See also W.J. Banks, “Fixing Friendly Frontiers,” *The Rotarian* (September 1941): 19-22.