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ALICE EVELYN WILSON

1881 - 1964

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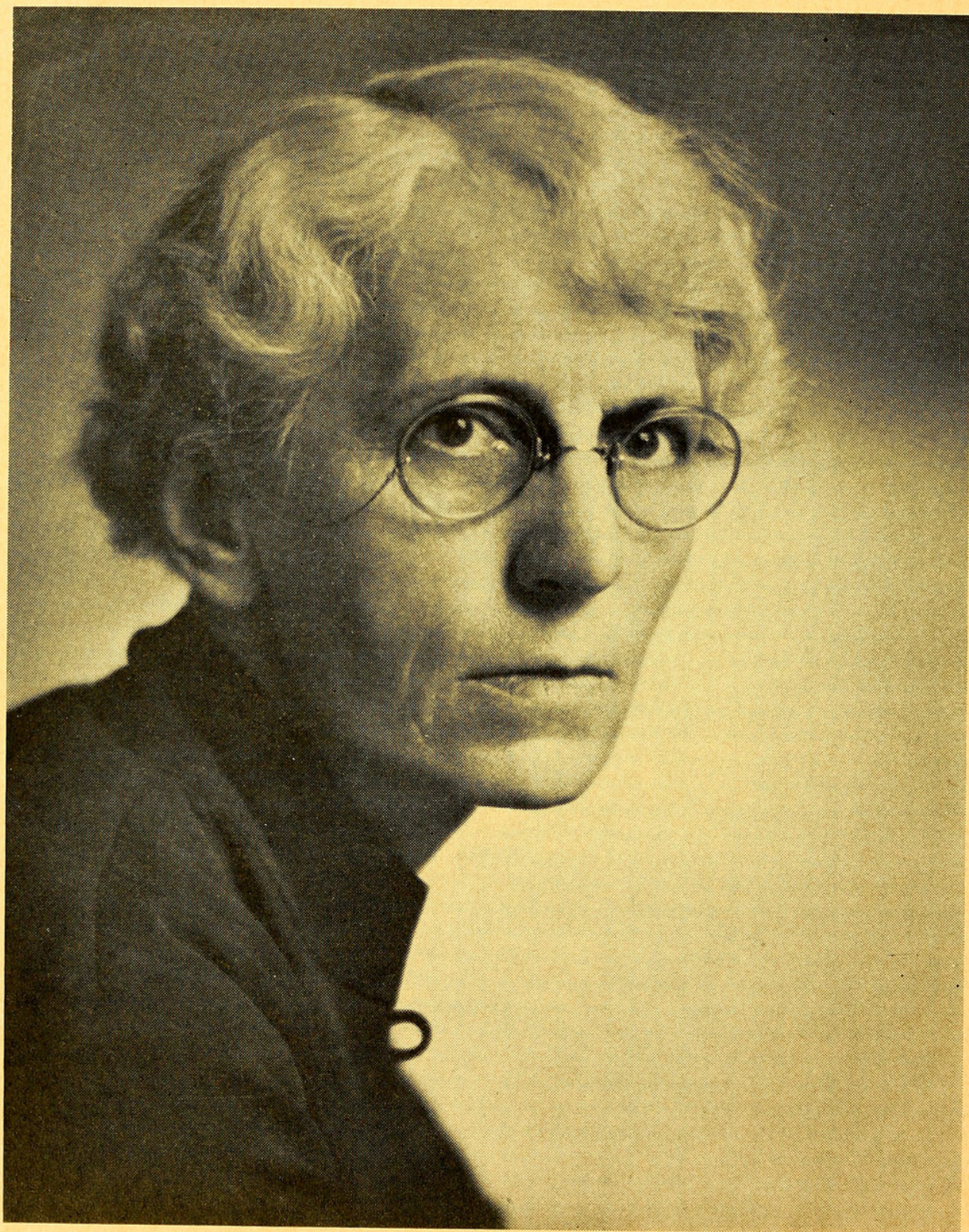
ALICE EVELYN WILSON WAS a gentle, quiet-spoken lady, who came of a prominent family in the Cobourg district. But she was of strong character, a person who could decide on her course and carry out the decision, in spite of obstacles and discouragement. It was in 1900, at the age of 19, that she decided to be a geologist. The Victorian era was drawing to a close, but its attitude towards women who sought a career outside the home was still that of frowning disapproval. And geology, of all things; why, my dear, you would have to go out on field work with men! But Alice found employment with the Geological Survey of Canada in Ottawa, and was able to attend the University of Toronto and graduate with her B.A. in 1911.

Back at Ottawa she had the impressive title of Museum Assistant. The Geological Survey had just moved into the new Victoria Memorial Museum and there was much to do in shifting, arranging and labelling the collections. These tasks were carried out conscientiously, but a geologist's laboratory is the out-of-doors, and in Ottawa this was the superb Ordovician section that had been made famous by Billings and Raymond and Ami. Unravelling the details of this 400 million year old record was to be her life's work.

Came 1914 and the first World War. The programme of the Geological Survey slowed down. In February, 1916, the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings burned, and the Victoria Memorial Museum was requisitioned to house the war-time Parliament. It was Alice Wilson who worked round the clock, supervising the meticulous packing of the exhibition and study collections. Then she sought war service in the Canadian equivalent of the Women's Land Army.

In 1920, with the war over, and the Survey back in the Museum building, Alice was now an Assistant Palaeontologist. Her chief was Dr. E. M. Kindle, a great student of fossils and a pioneer in the study of sedimentary processes. It was he who persuaded her that there was little future for a B.A. in professional science, so off she went to the University of Chicago, to take her Ph.D. under the great Stuart Weller. Ted Link, one of our most distinguished oil geologists, was a class-mate of hers in the graduate school, and he tells how she introduced the custom of afternoon tea. When she left, in 1929, Americanism asserted itself and the institution became afternoon coffee, a custom that still persists, I'm told. In addition to the doctorate, she came away with membership in the distinguished scientific fraternity of Sigma Xi.

Mailing date of this number: December 29, 1965



Alice Evelyn Wilson, June 6, 1939.

—photograph by Karsh, Ottawa.

Back in Ottawa, full of enthusiasm for great projects in Ordovician palaeontology and stratigraphy, she landed into the middle of the depression. Scientific research, except for the most utilitarian, again starved of support. But the advantage of having a research field in your front yard is that it doesn't cost much to work it; in fact you can do it on your own. And so the carefully documented collections, the meticulously recorded observations, the minutely sketched field maps, continued to accumulate. Not much of it had appeared in print, but people knew what was going on. So it was that in 1933, when the Bennett Government briefly re-introduced the Honours List for Canadians, Alice Wilson became a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

The years of careful study soon began to bear fruit, and a series of monographs on the fossils and the stratigraphy of the Ordovician rocks in the Ottawa and St. Lawrence valleys appeared as *Memoirs and Bulletins of the Geological Survey*. Recognition by her peers came in 1938 with her election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, the first time that this distinction had been given to a woman. From Assistant Geologist she was promoted to Associate Geologist and finally to Geologist, at which rank she retired in 1946.

Retired? No such thing! The monographs continued to flow, but to this impressive output were added a teaching programme at Carleton University, and increased activity in the popularization of Geology. All sorts of groups were given the grand tour: school children, university students, the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, and professional geologists. Fortunately she was persuaded to put down some of this lore, and her *Guide to the Geology of the Ottawa District*, published as Volume 70, No. 1 of the *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, will long be the standard reference for those who want to see the Ottawa section first-hand. And then there were trips abroad. One winter she and a companion travelled to Brazil by freighter and visited the Amazon jungle. At the International Geological Congress of 1956 in Mexico she took part in the excursions, and the sight of this dignified and seemingly frail lady geologist from Canada, in field clothes and riding a burro, was something to shake our Mexican colleagues.

To the last it was the unsolved problem that interested her most. For some time she was working on a paper that would set forth the needs for further studies in the Ottawa-St. Lawrence region. Whether she finished it or not I never learned. But I am sure that at the end her concern was for the fossils that remained to be identified, the faunal zones yet to be delimited, the correlations still to be refined, and the broad structural features that needed to be explained.

The name Wilson is an honourable one, both on the Geological Survey of Canada, and in the membership of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club. Because of her many contributions to geological sciences, her ability and willingness to pass on her findings at any level of learning and her devotion to and enthusiasm for the search for truth, Alice Evelyn Wilson was a worthy member of this distinguished group.



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