Sir John William Dawson: A Faithful Anthropologist

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie l'œuvre anthropologique de Sir William Dawson, Principal de l'université McGill de 1855 à 1893.

Les convictions religieuses de Dawson l'empêchaient d'admettre le concept d'évolution tel qu'appliqué en géologie, en biologie et en histoire humaine. Cependant, ses travaux archéologiques au site appelé "Hochelaga" ont une valeur durable.

In the last century there were no professional anthropologists in Canada and few people were seriously interested in the subject. Those who were worked in isolation from each other and none had students to carry on his work. These early pioneers thus had no direct links with the professional anthropology that developed in Canada during the present century and their works were largely ignored by their own and succeeding generations.

Recently, however, as Canadian anthropology has come of age, it has begun to search for its roots and these scholars of our country's early days have become objects of interest and serious attention. In 1963 the University of Toronto Press reprinted Horatio Hale's *The Iroquois Book of Rites,* with a new biographical introduction by William N. Fenton. In the last two years, two articles have appeared describing and evaluating the work of Sir Daniel Wilson, President of the University of Toronto from 1853 to 1892, and a man who in terms of his scholarship and productivity was a professional anthropologist in all but name (McIlwraith 1964; Trigger 1966).

So far, nothing has been written about the anthropological work of Sir Daniel Wilson's counterpart, Sir John William Dawson, Principal of McGill University from 1855 to 1893. In

this paper I would like to draw attention to the ideas that Dawson presented in his book Fossil *Men and their Modern Representatives,* first published in 1874 as a series of articles in the *Leisure Hour* and then rewritten and expanded before appearing in book form in 1880 (third edition 1888). The choice of this book is not accidental since it represents a summing up of Dawson's anthropological work and in its author's opinion was "one of the best (books) I have written" (Dawson 1901:130). Details concerning Dawson's life are derived from his autobiography *Fifty Years of Work in Canada* (1901).

John William Dawson was born in Pictou, Nova Scotia, of Scottish parents. At a young age he became interested in the fossils and rock formations of his native province, an interest that was encouraged by Dr. Thomas McCulloch, the head of the Pictou Academy, a local grammar school. In 1840 he made his way to Scotland to study geology at the University of Edinburgh and in 1841 he worked with the great British geologist, Sir Charles Lyell, in the Maritimes. After further studies in Edinburgh he returned to Nova Scotia with his Scottish bride in 1847 to become the provincial Superintendant of Education. As he travelled through the country on his official duties he continued his study of its geological formations and in 1855 published his *Acadian Geology,* which long remained the standard work on this subject. The same year Dawson was offered and accepted the principalship of McGill University, founded in 1821 but still languishing in what Dawson politely described as an "undeveloped condition" (1901:91). Dawson accepted the post on the condition that he also receive a chair of natural history. From that time on his career as an administrator and a geologist was a distinguished and rewarding one.

Dawson's interest in human history sprang from two sources. The one was the deep attachment to religion that he had inherited from his Presbyterian forebearers. This attachment was displayed both in his personal habits (he was a teetotaller) and his work on behalf of Christian organizations, which included the giving of lectures and the writing of religious tracts (Dawson 1901:129). His interest in the Bible led him to study it in the light of archaeology and natural history. The main results of this research were

two books entitled *Archaia, or Studies in the Narrative of Creation in the Hebrew Scriptures* (1860a) (later rewritten and republished as *The Origin of the World* (1877) and *Modern Science in Bible Lands* (1888b). The latter was published after a tour of Egypt and the Levant in 1883-1884 that was subsidized by a gift of $5000 collected among his friends in Montreal.

The second source of Dawson's interest in human history was his involvement in rescuing Indian artifacts and skeletons from an Iroquoian village site that was discovered just across Sherbrooke Street from the McGill campus, when excavations for building purposes were being made there. This happened in 1860, soon after Dawson's arrival in Montreal. Great interest was aroused in the site since it contained a small amount of European trade goods and seemed to be located in the right place to be the Indian village of Hochelaga, visited and described by Jacques Cartier in 1535. Dawson collected most of the material from the site that is now in the Redpath and McCord Museums at McGill, and he also published in the *Canadian Naturalist* (1860b; 1861) two articles which contain the only record that we have of what was observed in the course of the excavation. Sketchy though his descriptions are, they show an interest in recording information about this site which far outstripped that of any of his contemporaries in Montreal and they have recently provided much of the information used in a restudy of the site. Although long referred to as "Hochelaga", doubts have arisen concerning the accuracy of this designation and it has recently been renamed the Dawson site in honour of the work that the principal of McGill did there (Pendergast, Trigger, *et al,* n.d.)

Dawson's experience with local archaeology seems to have spurred his interest in the history and culture of the American Indians and inevitably these investigations were tied in with his older concern with the origin and history of the human race, particularly as described in the Bible. The subtitle of *Fossil Men* describes it as "an attempt to illustrate the characters and condition of pre-historic men in Europe, by those of the American races". In the introduction that follows, Dawson expresses the opinion commonly held by scholars of the time, that the study of living peoples with primitive economies could shed light on

the nature of life in prehistoric times. Indeed Daniel Wilson (1863) proposed to do much the same sort of thing when he wrote his *Prehistoric Man: Researches into the Origin of Civilization in the Old and New World* seventeen years earlier. What puts Dawson's study in a class by itself is his suggestion that such a comparison can be done most effectively not on a broad basis but by describing in detail "the antiquities of one tribe or locality, connecting the others with this, so as to show the homogeneous nature of the American culture, and then applying the whole to European facts and difficulties" (p. 4). Needless to say, the material he proposes to deal with is the Dawson site and Cartier's attendant description of Hochelaga. Most prehistorians of this period, attempting a similar work, would have first arranged the native cultures of North America in a series according to their degree of social and economic complexity and then attempted to see in the levels they defined within this series an illustration of the various stages of cultural evolution. Already, on the basis of archaeological evidence Sir John Lubbock (1865) and Gabriel de Mortillet (1867) had divided the Western European Stone Age into a sequence of cultures or traditions that gave strong support to the general concept of social and cultural evolution, if not to the specific schemes that theorists such as Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) were proposing. During the later Victorian period the related theories of cultural evolution and man's development from a simian-like ancestor came to be regarded by most scientists in England and Western Europe as a matter of scientific certainty (Daniel 1963:60-63). Was Dawson ignorant of the developments that had taken place in European archaeology in recent years or did he have something special in mind when he wrote of the "homogeneity" of the Stone Age?

Reading on, it becomes clear that Dawson is in fact arguing that the archaeological evidence collected to date does not constitute proof of cultural evolution. He begins by observing that when the Europeans first arrived in North America, Indian tribes were living at every possible level of development — some, like the Eskimo, hunters and gatherers, others, like the Iroquois, primitive agriculturalists and still others farther south in Mexico and Peru who were civilized. Moreover, the ancient mounds found throughout the Mississippi Valley offered clear proof, so Dawson

believed, that large portions of the continent had been occupied by "comparatively civilized" races (p. 56)[1] prior to the arrival of their most recent native inhabitants. He also suggested that "our American investigations show us that the people who used the best stone implements used also the rudest... so that out of any American village site we could pick out a collection of Paleolithic and Neolithic implements" (p. 214). From this, he concluded that there was no evidence that cultures at different levels of complexity had not co-existed throughout human history. He argued that few of the sites investigated up to that time were well stratified and hence the more "primitive" ones might well be the workshops or hunting camps of more advanced peoples who had their main settlements nearby (pp. 166-167). The sort of artifacts found in a site were hence no indication of its relative or absolute age. Moreover, the absence of pottery and agricultural remains in certain sites was no proof that their inhabitants had been ignorant of these arts, even in the earliest times. Stratified sites that appeared to show a developmental sequence might either be the products of short term local trends or else represent the adventitious interdigitation of contemporary groups with different ways of life. Early forms of fossil man (such as *Homo erectus*) had not yet been discovered and Dawson, like many others of his time (and a growing number of physical anthropologists today), regarded the Neanderthal people as not being essentially different from modern man. Hence he concluded that there was no proof of human biological evolution. Dawson was indeed scornful of the whole idea of biological evolution and wrote several tracts (at least one for a religious organization) presenting evidence in support of the fixity of species (Dawson 1901:129).

Dawson thus opposed the idea of cultural evolution by arguing that no convincing evidence had been presented to prove it had taken place. The claims put forward by the enemies of revealed religion to argue otherwise were at best equivocal and susceptible of varying interpretations. Today, with carbon dating, world wide archaeological sequences and a detailed record of human fossil forms, the idea of man's cultural and biological

[1] All references to page numbers only are to Dawson 1888a.

evolution is no longer in doubt. It would be all to easy for us to attribute Dawson's failure to appreciate the significance of the theoretical breakthroughs going on in prehistory to his isolation (although he visited England at frequent intervals), his amateur status as an anthropolgist and, above all, to his strong fundamentalist desire to demonstrate the literal truth of the Bible. If we assume this to be so, we are hard pressed to critize Dawson, especially on the last point. After all, is not the acceptance of the biological theory of evolution as much an act of faith for most anthropologists as was Dawson's acceptance of the literal truth of the Biblical creation story? While most of us learn the tenants of biological evolution and a few well chosen examples to illustrate each point, would we not be hard pressed to say that we had personally verified enough observations to provide independent support for the theory?

What casts a far darker shadow on Dawson's work is that his desire to prove the literal truth of the Bible led him to oppose the idea of evolution not only in the spheres of biology and human history, where he was an amateur, but also in the field of geology, in which he was a professional and had made many original observations. While Dawson was perfectly willing to admit that the six days of creation might be metaphorical expressions for a long period of time, he was unwilling to admit that man had existed on the earth for more than a few thousand years. He argued that, even if tools and human bones were found in the same strata as extinct forms of mammals, this proved nothing about their age, since many forms of animal life had become extinct within living memory. He also denied that the earliest geological deposits in which human remains were present need have any great age, since geological processes may have gone on much more rapidly in the past than they do now. On his trip to Europe in 1865 he visited the gravels of the Somme Valley, the site of some very important Paleolithic excavations. He describes his mentor Charles Lyell, the father of modern historical geology, as taking "very good-naturedly" his opinion that evidence was lacking "of the excessive antiquity at that time attributed to (these gravels) by some writers" (Dawson 1901:145). Dawson remained fully convinced of Noah's flood throughout his lifetime and on this basis distinguished between *Paleocosmic* and *Neocosmic*

man (1888a:208). Thus he not only rejected the uniformitarianism of Charles Lyell but also embraced an only slightly modified version of Georges Cuvier's antiquated and anti-evolutionary doctrine of catastrophism. He thus rejected evolution not only in those fields in which he was an amateur but also in those in which he had professional competence. It is significant that in each case his defence of pre-evolutionary positions was entirely negative. He never attempted to present any evidence to demonstrate that these theories were correct, but merely attempted to argue that there was not enough evidence to justify accepting any alternative. This, of course, is the position of a conservative fighting a losing cause.

Since Dawson believed that man had been created only several thousand years before Christ, he had strong reasons for believing in the "underlying unity" of culture and more especially of "the higher hopes and aspirations of humanity" (p. 339). He believed that all the languages of the world showed traces of their common origin (pp. 310-311) as did man's conception of a supreme being and his belief in immortality (pp. 278-281; 303-304). He even argued that the prehistoric carvings of Europe were totemic symbols that "an American Indian could... read ... in his own tongue as pictographs" (p. 276). Physical variations were produced more by cultural differences than by long separation and environment (pp. 177-180). Prognathism of the jaw and a recession of the forehead were "more an indication of lowness of culture and civilization than of difference of race" (p. 179).

Dawson divided humanity into three "races" patterned on a then popular classification of languages as members of a Turanian, Aryan or Semitic family. He called these races Turanian, Japhetic and Semitic. The Turanian was believed to be the oldest and its culture and physical type are preserved to the present day among the indigenous inhabitants of Siberia and the New World (pp. 277-279; 334). These people possessed a basic notion of God and immortality and were originally free of such later "degradations" as polytheism, atheism, polygamy, and cannibalism (pp. 281, 316, 145). Out of this state arose the Semitic race, which carried the basic ideas of Turanian religion to new heights

and the Japhetic race, which sought mastery over the natural world and was well on its way to ruling it (p. 334). Dawson believed degeneration to be as characteristic of human history as progress and identified as the leading progressive forces the "God-given genius" of certain gifted men and contact between the more civilized and primitive peoples (pp. 331-333).

It is clear that Dawson was firmly opposed to the transformations that the application of the concept of evolution was bringing about in the fields of biology, geology and human history. His "middle course" which he believed was "most likely in the end to be correct" (1901:144) was ultimately proved wrong and in following it he deprived himself of the opportunity of actively participating in the scientific advances of his day. Like Sir Daniel Wilson he was religious, but Wilson never allowed his religious sentiments to interfere with his scientific judgments. In many other ways as well, Wilson was a more tolerant man who, unlike Dawson, did not find it necessary to describe Hinduism, polygamy and other non-western patterns of behaviour as degenerate.

There are many anthropologists who are extremely proud of the natural science origins of their discipline and who contrast the rigour of its methodology with the inexplicit and sometimes incoherent prodecures of humanists. In terms of carrying out specific projects of research there is much to be said for this method. Wilson's background, however, was in history and English; Dawson's in geology. Comparing the work of these men we have cause to wonder if a training in the natural sciences provides any better preparation for grappling with the broader and more emotionally charged issues that confront the study of man in any given generation.

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