

Most of you probably are familiar with this lady, but for those of you who are not, I send this along fyi. I found it most interesting.

d.b.

Alice Wilson (1881-1964) Geologist

First female geologist in Canada and first woman to become a member of the Royal Society of Canada Alice Wilson was a remarkable woman in many ways. During her lifetime she struggled against ill health, struggled to obtain needed academic qualifications to pursue her work, and struggled to receive professional recognition and promotion in a man's field. It was her extraordinary determination and her enormous enthusiasm for her work that always carried her forward. Wilson was born in Cobourg, Ontario in 1881 to a family where scholarship, and the sciences in particular, were highly valued. In addition to a love of learning, Alice was introduced in her childhood to outdoor life, canoeing and camping with her father and brothers. Her early interest in the fossils in the limestone formations in the Cobourg area blossomed into a career as an eminent paleontologist noted for her detailed studies of the fossils and rock of the Ottawa-Saint Lawrence Lowland. Her early outdoor experience provided her with the skills, enthusiasm, and self-confidence for geological field work. Wilson entered Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1901 studying modern languages and history and expecting to enter one of the few professions open to women - that of teaching. However, due to ill health, she was unable to return to university to complete her last year of studies. Once well, she worked in the Mineralogy Division of the University of Toronto Museum, thus beginning her career in the field of geology. In 1909, Wilson started work at the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) in Ottawa as a museum assistant. She remained at the Survey the rest of her life, officially retiring in 1946 but maintaining an office there until shortly before her death in 1964. Throughout her career at the GSC, Wilson faced many barriers as a woman. Wishing to undertake field work, she wrote to her superiors "with reference to further field work of the more strenuous type, I would like to point out that while not heavily built, I am muscularly very strong, and from earliest childhood have been accustomed to an out-of-door life both with canoe and tramping." (Meadowcroft 1990) However, field work in remote areas with male colleagues was out of the question. She convinced the Survey to send her on short trips to the relatively unstudied Ottawa-Saint Lawrence Valley. For the next fifty years, she studied this area on foot, by bicycle and eventually by car. When the Survey would not issue her a car for field work as they did men, she bought her own. In order to advance her professional qualifications, Wilson first requested leave to undertake doctoral studies in 1915. At that time the Survey was granting paid leaves of absence for studies. Her request for leave was repeatedly denied. In 1926 Alice was given permission by the Survey to apply for a scholarship offered by the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW). However, when Wilson won the scholarship, the Survey again denied her leave. The CFUW lobbied this decision to the highest political levels and the leave was eventually granted. Wilson finally achieved her long-standing goal receiving her PhD in 1929 at the age of forty-nine. Returning to the Survey with doctorate in hand, she was repeatedly denied promotions and the professional recognition due to her. In 1935, when the government of R.B. Bennett was looking for a woman in the federal civil service to honour, Wilson was chosen to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire. Shortly thereafter, the GSC published her work for the first time in ten years and gave her a promotion. In 1936 Wilson became a Fellow in the Geological Society of America and in 1938 became the first woman Fellow in the Royal Society of Canada. After compulsory retirement at the age of sixty-five, Wilson entered what can be considered the happiest stage of her career. She continued her scientific work until months before her death. With the 1947 publication of her book



The earth beneath our feet, Wilson completed a long-standing project of sharing her love of geology with children. From 1948 until 1958 she was a much-appreciated Lecturer in Paleontology at Carleton College (later Carleton University), enthusiastically leading her students into the field. Carleton University recognized Wilson both as a geologist and as an inspiring teacher conferring an honorary degree upon her in 1960. In tributes to her after her death, Alice Willson was recognized as one of Canada's most respected geologists, a paleontologist of worldwide reputation, and an inspiring teacher. She should also be remembered for blazing a trail for women in what had previously been a man's world.

Suggested readings: Meadowcroft, Barbara. -- "Alice Wilson, 1881-1964 : explorer of the earth beneath her feet". -- Despite the odds : essays on Canadian women and science. -- Ed. Mariane Gosztonyi Ainley. -- Montreal : Véhicule Press, c1990. -- P. 204-219 Montagnes, Anne. -- "Alice Wilson, 1881-1964". -- The clear spirit : twenty Canadian women and their times. -- Ed. Mary Quayle Innes. -- Toronto : University of Toronto Press, c1966. -- P. 260-278 Russell, Loris. -- "Alice Evelyn Wilson". -- Canadian field naturalist. -- Vol. 79, no. 3 (July-September 1965). -- P. 159-161 Sarjeant, William A.S. -- "Alice Wilson, first woman geologist with the Geological Survey of Canada". -- Earth science history. -- Vol. 12, no. 2 (1993). -- P. 122-128 Sinclair, G.W. -- "Alice Evelyn Wilson 1881-1964". -- Proceedings and transactions of the Royal Society of Canada. -- Series IV, Vol. IV (June 1966). -- P. 117-121 Sinclair, G.W. -- "Memorial to Alice Evelyn Wilson 1881-1964". -- Proceedings of the Geological Association of Canada. -- Vol. 16 (1965). -- P. 127-128 Children's literature: Webb, Michael . -- Alice Wilson : telling the earth's story. -- Mississauga : Copp Clark Pitman, c1991. -- 28 p. -- Also published in French under the title: Alice Wilson : l'histoire de la Terre Wilson, Alice. -- The earth beneath our feet. -- Toronto : Macmillan, c1947. -- 294 p.

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