

The Tyrrell Expedition of 1893

Gray Scrimgeour

Here are what I believe are the only two known covers related to the 1893 Canadian Government Expedition, an exploratory trip from Lake Athabasca to Hudson Bay via the Dubawnt River. The expedition, led by Joseph Burr Tyrrell of the Geological Survey of Canada [GSC]—a geologist and cartographer, travelled north from Edmonton to Fort Chipewyan, and then northeast to Baker Lake and Chesterfield Inlet on Hudson Bay, then south to Winnipeg, where they arrived on January 2, 1894. Fig. 1 is a map showing the route taken by the expedition.

James Williams Tyrrell (J.B. Tyrrell's brother—a topographer, surveyor, engineer, and assistant leader of the expedition) wrote a detailed report of the expedition¹. Various editions of this report are available online.

Most of the expedition's members left Edmonton by carriage on May 29, 1893, and arrived at Athabasca Landing the following evening. This group consisted of J.B. Tyrrell, J. W. Tyrrell, and four 'canoemen' (three Iroquois from Quebec and John Flett from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan). They were to be joined at Fort McMurray by another canoe and two expert portagers, James Corrigan and François Maurice from Isle-à-la-Crosse. Their supplies were freighted from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing and then to Fort Chipewyan by the Hudson's Bay Company.

On the evening of May 30th, they started their canoe journey from Athabasca Landing. The six men in two canoes proceeded down-

stream to Fort McMurray (June 9th). The enlarged party—now with three canoes—left Fort McMurray on June 15th and arrived at Fort Chipewyan, Lake Athabasca on June 17th. The S.S. Grahame arrived there with the party's supplies on June 19th. A guide, Moberly, joined the group at Fort Chipewyan and travelled with them to the east end of Lake Athabasca.

The party headed east on Lake Athabasca on June 21st and reached Fond-du-Lac on June 29th and the east end of the lake on July 1st. Next, they started upstream on a river—with several long portages—leading to Black Lake. On July 8th, the group left civilization (and their maps), heading north and then east by the Dubawnt River system through the Barren Lands. On August 19th, they first met Inuit, after passing through territory that had much ice. They eventually reached Baker Lake (September 2nd, 810 miles from Black Lake) and Chesterfield Inlet (September 7th). They then travelled—with difficulty—along the coast of Hudson Bay to Churchill (reached October 18th). Finally, they proceeded on snowshoes or sleds to York Factory (November 24th) and West Selkirk, Manitoba (January 1, 1894) and by train to Winnipeg (January 2, 1894).

J. W. Tyrrell's report records that letters were sent back through Edmonton three times during the expedition. Letters written on May 30th at Athabasca Landing were sent

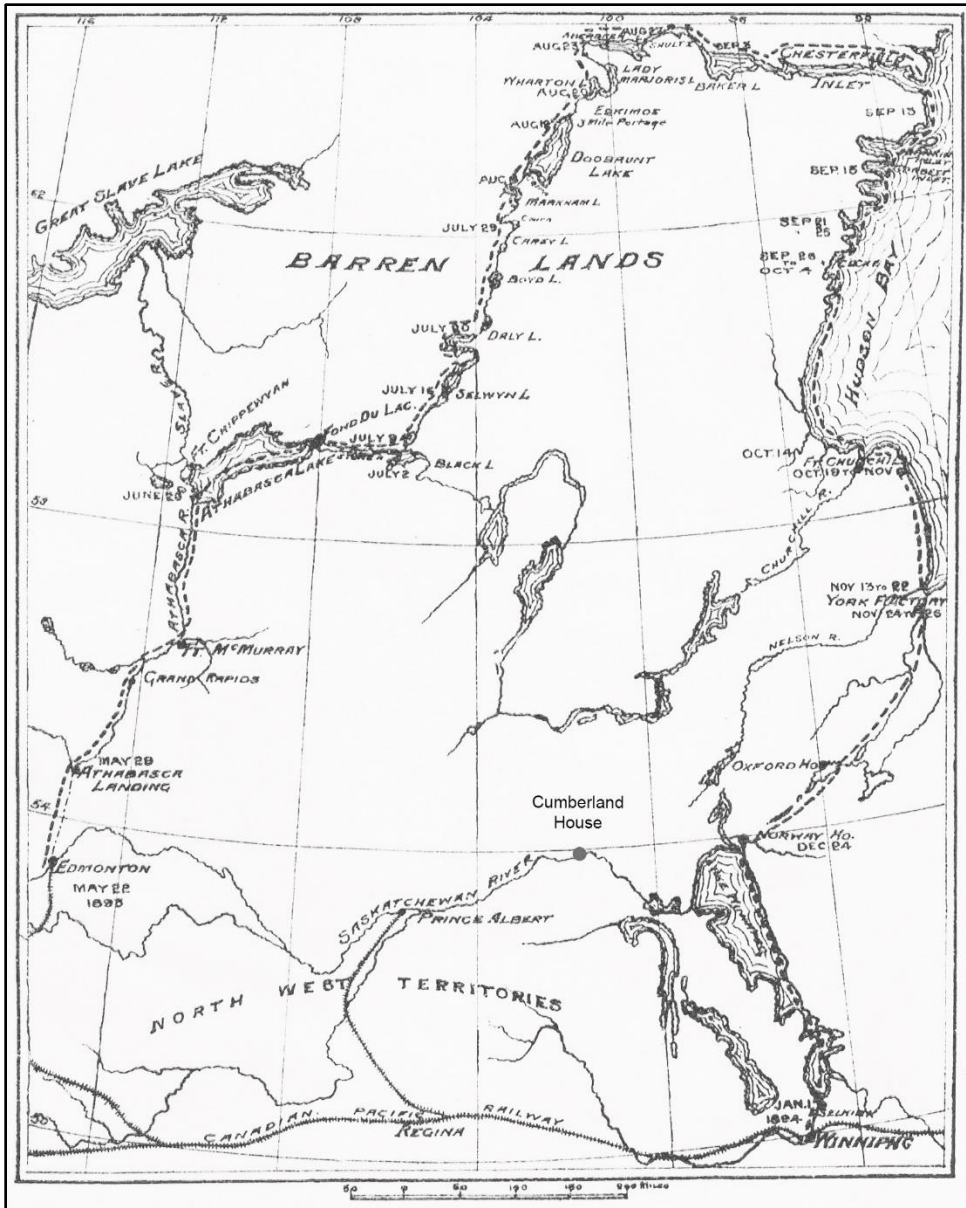


Figure 1: Detailed map of the route of the Tyrrell expedition, showing dates for their progress. Adapted from J.W. Tyrrell, *Across the Sub-Arctics of Canada*, T.F. Unwin (London) 1898, p. 13, found online from the British Library at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/11245952434/>.

back to Edmonton with their carriage driver. Letters written at Fort Chipewyan on June 20th were to go south by packet about July 16th. On July 1st, letters were left at the east end of Lake Athabasca for carriage to Fort Chipewyan for possible forwarding to Edmonton by the fall packet; this was the last

to James W. Tyrrell's autograph on a copy of his report¹. The cover entered the mail stream in Edmonton on July 25, 1893, and reached Toronto on August 1st. It was redirected to Weston, Ontario (August 1 broken circle backstamp). J. W. Tyrrell's and J. B. Tyrrell's father William Tyrrell lived in Weston.

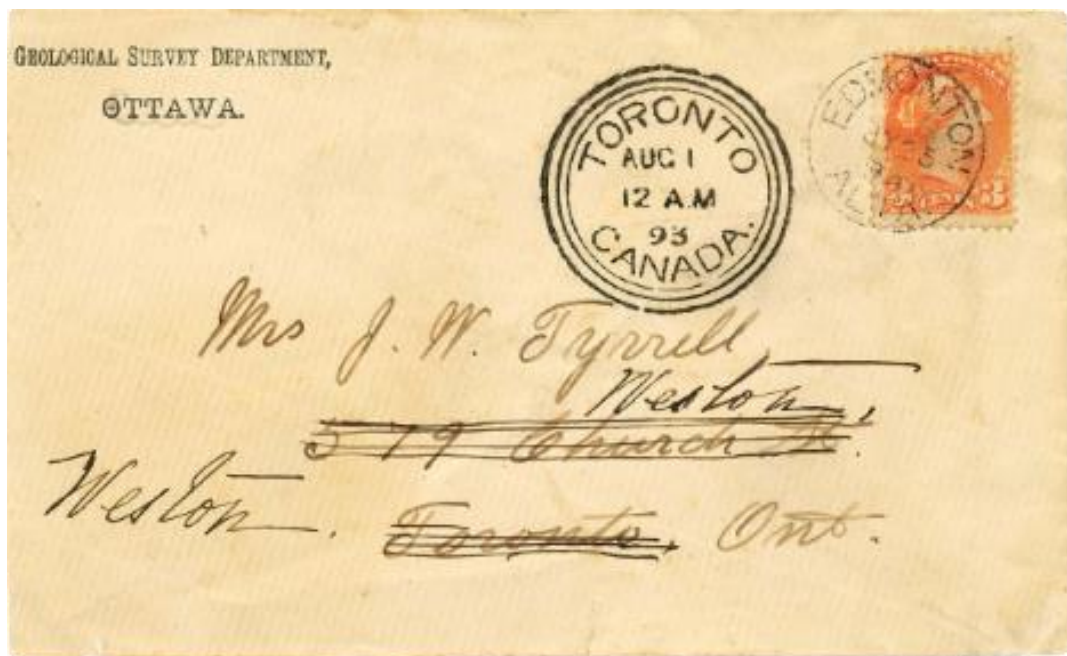


Figure 2: Geological Survey Dept. envelope sent from Fort Chipewyan to Toronto, then readdressed to Weston, Ontario.

chance to send mail to friends or family.

Fig. 2 shows a cover I purchased from Jim Hennok many decades ago. It was sent on the way by J. W. Tyrrell to his wife [Isabel Charlton Tyrrell née Macdonald] in Ontario, at 579 Church St., Toronto. The Toronto city directory for 1893 lists the resident at 579 Church St. as James Macdonald (Isabel's father). I verified that J. W. Tyrrell wrote the cover by comparing the cover's handwriting

Judging by the Edmonton postmark date, this cover was written at Fort Chipewyan.

The cover in Fig. 3 was Lot 3560 in the Sparks Auctions sale of Ted Kerzner's squared circle collection (February 2, 2017). It originated in Weston, Ontario on August 31, 1893, and bears the earliest recorded date for the Weston squared circle. The cover is addressed to J. W. Tyrrell Esq., Cumberland House, North-West Territory. Cumberland



Figure 3: Cover from Weston, Ontario addressed to J. W. Tyrrell at Cumberland House, Saskatchewan. The cover was forwarded to Ottawa and then to Hamilton. The section of the back shown actual size.



House is on the Saskatchewan River, east of Prince Albert (see Fig. 1). The cover is endorsed at the upper left with the direction “If not called for by 31 Dec please return to 579 Church St., Toronto”. [This is the same address as that on the cover in Fig. 2, the Macdonald residence.]

The cover bears postmarks applied at Prince Albert (September 5), Cumberland House (September 21; weak), Ottawa (February 9, 1894) and Hamilton (February 10, 12

1894). In the 1890s, mail went to Cumberland House from Prince Albert via Fort à la Corne. Prince Albert to Fort à la Corne (55 miles) mail was weekly; Fort à la Corne to Cumberland House (175 miles) mail was monthly. From Cumberland House, the cover went—lacking any redirection mark—to Ottawa to the GSC offices. There, it was readdressed to 42 James St. North, Hamilton, Ont.; in the same ink are the initials JBT (for James Burr Tyrrell). The Hamilton city directory for 1893

lists 42 James St. as J. W. Tyrrell's office. The return address and the original address were crossed out at two different times (possibly at Cumberland House and Ottawa, respectively).

The cover in Fig. 3 perhaps was sent in reply to that in Fig. 2. I suspect J. W. Tyrrell's wife sent this cover to a location where her husband might have surfaced or had contact during the expedition—but didn't. At Cumberland House, it probably was forwarded to the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) office in Ottawa along with other expedition mail that could not be delivered to the expedition members at Cumberland House.

The Tyrrell Expedition went from the District of Alberta through the District of Athabasca, the unorganized N.W.T. and the District of Keewatin to reach Hudson Bay and eventually the Province of Manitoba (Fig. 4). J. W. Tyrrell's account of their journey tells of their many difficulties. The University of Toronto Library has published a digital collection entitled The Barren Lands Collection about this expedition². I could not find any letter connected to the letter to Cumberland House. However, there are scans of a

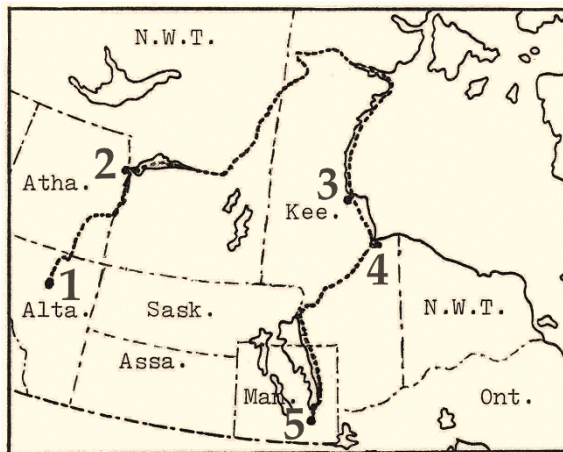


Figure 4: Outline map of the route of the Tyrrell Expedition of 1893. The group left Edmonton (1) by wagon. They travelled east from Fort Chipewyan (2), then north and east by the Dubawnt River system and eventually reached Churchill (3), York Factory (4) and Winnipeg (5).

four-page letter written on June 4, 1893 (Tyrrell's wedding anniversary)³. The message was written on two pieces of bark. It is listed as "Letter to William C. Tyrrell" - J. W. Tyrrell's six-month-old son. It was written on the "bank of the great Athabasca River." Could it have been enclosed in the envelope in Fig. 2?

Studying my covers addressed by

and to James Williams Tyrrell has taught me a lot about Canadian exploration history. I would like to hear of any other covers related to this expedition.

Acknowledgements:

I want to thank Brian Copeland, Kevin O'Reilly and Brian Plain for this article's review, suggestions, and assistance.

References:

1. Tyrrell, J. W., *Across the Sub-Arctics of Canada*, Third Edition, W. Briggs, Toronto (1908), as seen at the University of Toronto Library and online at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/118572#page/1/mode/1up>
2. The Barren Lands Collection, The University of Toronto Library, <https://barrenlands.library.utoronto.ca/>
3. <https://barrenlands.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/barrenlands%3AL10001>