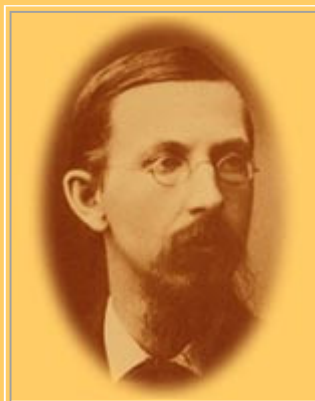


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William Healey Dall

1845-1927



William Healey Dall.
Source: Smithsonian Archives.

When he was in high school, William Healey Dall fell in love -- with a book. *The Report of the Invertebrata of Massachusetts*, by A. A. Gould was hardly a romance, but the young Dall became immediately enchanted with mollusks: the conchs, clams, octopi and their kind that make up this class of sea creature. He eagerly gathered living specimens

and shells from the shore near his home in suburban Boston, studying and continually re-arranging his collections.

Dall came from a family that valued learning. His mother was a school teacher, strict, scholarly, and brilliant. His father had studied at Harvard; a Unitarian missionary, he spent decades in India, away from the family. Dall seems to have inherited his mother's gift for scholarship, his father's penchant for lengthy travel. In his late teens he'd taken a job with the Land Office of the Illinois Central Railroad in Chicago, and spent a year searching for iron ore deposits in northern Michigan.

At age 20, he had joined the Western Union telegraph expedition to Alaska, the first of many trips. He was actually in Alaska, collecting specimens and making notes on Indian vocabulary, when the United States bought the territory. When that expedition was cut short, Dall had stayed on another year at his own expense. Reporting on his efforts, he wrote "I have traveled on snow shoes, with the thermometer from 8 to 40 below zero. I have paddled in open canoes up stream six hundred and fifty miles, and down, 1,300 miles. I have obtained 4,450 specimens, including a set of the



Alaska Natives

rocks from Fort Yukon to the sea." On one of his trips, he had named and explored the vast Malaspina glacier. When he'd married in 1880, he'd taken his wife to Sitka as part of the honeymoon.

Aboard the *Elder*, Dall was officially the "paleontologist, geographer, etc.," and he was certainly the undisputed expert on Alaska. His shipmates were often surprised by his wealth of knowledge, both in biology and in respect to the Native cultures of Alaska. He had sufficient overview to appreciate the rich tribal art, the pure elegance of traditional craft work and tool-making skills. Because he had traveled in the region for so many years, he was able to assess the effect Europe and the United States had had on the Native tribes of the region. "The advent of the white man," he wrote, "has spoiled and will continue to spoil the holy wilderness."

For the expedition report, Dall wrote a history of the Europeans in Alaska, as well as the full volume, *Land and Fresh Water Mollusks and Hydroids*. In the years after the Harriman Expedition, he spent much of his time in the north tower of the Smithsonian Museum, writing about Alaska, and organizing and reporting on the vast mollusk collection he had built at the Smithsonian Museum. William Dall was known in scientific circles as "able, strict, scrupulously honest, Puritanic, " a generous man who collected shells and published poetry. He died in Washington, DC, in 1927.

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