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John Wesley Powell Trailblazing IWU Prof-Scientist Subject of New Biography

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--A legendary Illinois Wesleyan University scientist and explorer is the target of a new biography published this month by Oxford University Press.

John Wesley Powell, who was a prominent IWU professor in the post-Civil War years, is the subject of "A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell" written by Donald Worster, the Hall Distinguished Professor at the University of Kansas.

Worster's 673-page volume with 47 halftones and a half-dozen maps chronicles the teacher, writer, conservationist, and explorer who led the first expedition that put the Colorado river on American maps and revealed the Grand Canyon to the world.

"A River Running West" is the first biography of Powell in almost 50 years.

Powell Joins IWU

Worster observed that Powell joined the IWU faculty when the university, founded in 1850, was just 15 years old. The first year, Powell earned \$1,500 as a science professor. IWU had awarded him an honorary master's degree, when Powell was stationed at Vicksburg, Miss., during the Civil War.

"With no earned degree of any kind," Worster wrote, "he looked very unqualified to offer advanced instruction, but now Wesleyan could see no obstacle to making him a faculty member. By fall he was ready, and ever so eager, to show what elevated place science should occupy in a modern institution of higher education."

At the time, IWU's enrollment stood at about nearly 200 students--males only--about 75 percent of whom were studying in a preparatory or pre-college program.

Powell's Impact on Campus

Here's the way Worster describes Powell's immediate impact on the IWU campus: "That first year Powell, the erstwhile college dropout, charged across the campus like a whirlwind, overwhelming both the faculty and students. He quickly set up a tiny museum, with himself the curator . . . Professor DeMotte and he set about reorganizing the curriculum and faculty duties, while alone he drew up plans for a new central building; when carried out, they gave the college its 'Old Main.'

"Professor Powell then took on the task of designing a college seal, which likewise was accepted; the sign of an open book with the words 'Scientia et Sapientia' written across the pages. He filled his students' heads with plenty of 'scientia' of a distinctly nonclassical variety."

Academic Dynamo

Powell was an academic dynamo. To the freshman in the scientific department he taught chemistry, botany, and physical geography. He taught sophomores systematic zoology, comparative anatomy, and physiology (with added lectures on cellular histology, the vertebrate skeleton, and insects injurious to vegetation). Powell's courses for juniors included natural philosophy and organic chemistry (with lectures on agricultural chemistry and organic chemistry (with lectures on agricultural chemistry). And for the seniors, Powell taught his specialty of mineralogy and geology (with lectures on the history of geology)."

Worster describes Powell's teaching technique as wanting "to get students outdoors and inspire them with reading the book of nature in the field." One student remembered years later: "We all recall how text-books went to the winds with Major Powell."

Powell joined the IWU faculty in 1865, remaining for more than two years.

Worster wrote: "Midway through his second year [at IWU Powell] was angling for another position at Illinois State Normal University, a campus located only a short way from Illinois Wesleyan . . . The Normal faculty knew him well through his work as secretary of the Illinois Natural History Society, which kept its collections on their campus. As secretary he had delivered lectures on natural history to their students."

Powell Assessed

Oxford University Press points out that: "In 'A River Running West,' Donald Worster tells the story of Powell's great adventures and describes his historical significance with compelling clarity, verve and skill. Worster paints a vivid portrait of how this man emerged from the early 19th-century world of immigrants, fervent religion, and rough-and tumble rural life, and barely survived the Civil War battle at Shiloh after losing his right arm. But nature, not war or physical disability, would pose his greatest test of fortitude."

Powell Synopsis

Powell (1834-1902) was born in Mount Morris, N.Y. As an Oberlin University student, Powell developed his interest in geology. He volunteered for the Union army during the Civil War, losing his right arm at the Battle of Shiloh.

As an Illinois Wesleyan faculty member, Powell took IWU students on the first of his many field trips into the Rocky Mountains region. In 1869 he led an expedition, financed by the U.S. government, that included a spectacular 900-mile journey down the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon.

"The heart of Worster's biography," Oxford University Press points out, "is Powell's gutsy epic journey down the Colorado in 1869, a tale of harrowing experiences, lethal accidents, and breathtaking discoveries. The famous river voyage not only testified to Powell's driving

ambition, it opened the national imagination to a landscape that continues to astonish, awe, and inspire."

He made other government-sponsored expeditions and in 1875 became director of the U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. In 1879 this merged with the U.S. Geological Survey and Powell became its second director, serving from 1881-94.

A key Powell work, "Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States" (1878), develops a land-classification program and a survey of irrigation potential. Powell was among the first to call for the federal government to play a role in developing the western territories.

Powell became a student of Native-Americans and was he first to attempt to classify their languages.

In 1897 Powell became the first director of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, which he headed until his death.

Purchase Information

"A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell," ISBN: 0-19-509991-5, is priced at \$35. For more information, contact: Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016-4314; 212/726-6000 (telephone); 212/726-6447 (Fax); and www.oup.com.