

MILESTONES » HOW KICKING HORSE PASS GOT ITS NAME

# 'My grave was dug'

An adventurous Scot made such a mark on two countries an ocean apart that he nearly was buried in both of them. **Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall** explains

A 30-pound piece of the Rockies crossed the Pacific this month to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of the man known as New Zealand's father of science.

Oddly, the boulder sent by the mayor of Golden, B.C., could easily have made the trek next year to mark the 150th anniversary of the same event. That's because, just as New Zealand has set aside a mountain, a lake, a town and a grave for Sir James Hector, so has Canada.

The Scottish-born scientist and adventurer spent the last 46 years of his life in the land of the Maoris, and in that time he set up the national geological survey, national museum and national science academy. But today, few New Zealanders are aware of his many contributions, so Simon Nathan, a leading expert on Sir James, plans to write his biography – unless, he says, “anyone else wants to do it.”

“Don't get me wrong,” says the celebrated geologist and contributing editor to New Zealand's ambitious new online encyclopedia. “I do have a lot of time for the man. It's just that, well, the really good stuff all happened before he got to this country.”

For example, his first grave was located not far from the spot in Kicking Horse Canyon where the commemorative boulder was found – and was dug for the same reason the canyon was given its name.

On Aug. 29, 1858, Sir James was just 23 and a member of the Palliser Expedition, which had been dispatched to explore and chart passages through the Rocky Mountains in preparation for the arrival of the railway.

As a doctor, sketch artist, naturalist, geologist and adventurer, he had the mind of a scholar, the conditioning of a packhorse and the work ethic of a typical Scotsman. The young man from Edinburgh fit in well with his Métis guides, who liked and respected him – important when the going was so treacherous.

The expedition – two years of hunger, floods, snowshoes, dogs, sleeping in the snow,

writing every day, heading back to the edge of civilization every few months to file a report and hope it reached England – had travelled all the way to the Rockies from Lake Superior, and now things were getting tough for the men and for their horses. Game was scarce. The canyon down to the river was without grass for feeding and strewn with fallen timber. The animals were short on energy and temper, legs cut and bleeding from having to scramble over all the deadfall.

As they neared a 12-metre waterfall, a packhorse lost its footing and plunged into the icy river. After much scrambling, it was pulled to safety, but by then Sir James's own horse had taken off. Chasing after it, he was kicked in the chest and lay on the ground, motionless.

How far his party got in burying him is a matter of some debate. Some say the grave was barely begun, others say he was being lowered in and still others say dirt was being shovelled on him when his eyelids began to flicker.

In any event, he came back to life, and Kicking Horse Pass – the route of the Canadian Pacific Railway and later the Trans-Canada Highway – had its name.

## UNSUNG HERO

Not long before the centenary of when Sir James was finally laid to rest in the rich soil of New Zealand, I was there, hitchhiking from Christ Church to Picton to catch a boat to the north island.

My final destination was Wellington, which became the nation's capital in 1865, the same year young Dr. Hector, after further exploration of British Columbia, California, Mexico, then the wilds on this side of the Pacific, became the first director of the Geological Study of New Zealand.

Along the way, I saw a pod of Hector dolphins, and no doubt tramped past a dozen plants and animals with the species name *Hectori*. In some ways, even the time and space through which I travelled are credited to him. The first geological maps were created by Dr. Hector, as was New Zealand

Standard Time. And yet none of the people who picked me up knew who he was.

Later, as I sat drinking Guinness in Picton, a geologist was at work in the Kicking Horse Pass, selecting the Hector boulder, booked to travel on Air New Zealand's inaugural flight from Vancouver to Auckland and to reach Wellington in time for a symposium on Sir James.

When I reached the capital, I met the knowledgeable and witty Mr. Nathan, who described Sir James as “very pragmatic” and added: “He was no slouch, of course. ... He was a great manager, compiler, administrator.” But not exactly Indiana Jones.

Later, he and I joined Peter Hector, the affable great-grandson of Sir James, on Hector Street and took his photograph – “for the book,” said



Mr. Nathan (unless, of course, someone else writes it).

While in town, I also visited the vacant lots where the Colonial Museum and Sir James's elaborate hillside manor used to be, as well as the Te Aka Matua (formerly Hector) Library, where his portrait still hangs, although not prominently displayed.

The entrance to the impressive botanical gardens he established still has a plaque bearing his name, but neither there nor at the Meteorological Society do the people at the information desk seem to know much about him.

Perhaps the problem stems from the fact that the "really good stuff" happened in Canada, without the fallout from his further achievements.

In the Wild West, he never grew older than 26, a cool footnote in our history. But in New Zealand, he lived to 74 and is seen as the establishment, the namesake of every institution, a forever aged, Old World man.

Yet his connection with Canada – and with Canadian graves – didn't end in 1858.

In 1903, at the invitation of the CPR, he made a return visit, crossing the Pacific with his son, Douglas, who was the same age his father had been when he left Canada. On the way to Kicking Horse Pass, they met local writer and photographer Mary Shaffer. Having played down the story in his own journals, the elder Mr. Hector now seemed to revel in his past: "I saw his heels fly up," he told her. "And then knew nothing more for hours. When I regained consciousness, my grave was dug and they were preparing to put me in it. So that's how the Kicking Horse got its name and that's how I came to have a grave in this part of the world."

Sadly, so did his son. The day after meeting Mary Shaffer, young Douglas died suddenly, a victim of appendicitis. His father buried him not far from his own first grave, then returned to New Zealand, his heart like granite, to live his fi-

nal days.

Now, 100 years later, a boulder from Kicking Horse has made that same voyage.

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Young James Hector and, top, Golden's boulder ready for shipping: 'I saw his heels fly up, and then knew nothing more for hours,' he said of his near-death experience. 'When I regained consciousness, my grave was dug and they were preparing to put me in it.'