

William Pearce

Called the “irrigation crank”, William Pearce was an early advocate of water’s economic importance.

He tried to persuade the Canadian Pacific Railway that they could reclaim three million acres of land by irrigating one million acres, but he could not convince them that this seepage scheme would work. Water was a serious concern in the early west and Pearce believed that irrigation could balance limited water resources. Blunt to the point of rudeness, Pearce’s tactlessness and his appropriation of river access earned him enmity, but that did not affect his integrity as a civil servant or his determination to yoke irrigation and land management.

Egocentric and cantankerous, Pearce irritated everyone. Although he would promise to moderate his manners, his impatience always won. Hundreds of complaints (one letter charged that 98 of 100 people hated him) against Pearce did not change his attitudes. But in 1904, after the government took away his typewriter, he finally resigned.



William Pearce
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Pearce also had an eye for arboreal beauty, and thanks to him the green boulevard along Memorial Drive in Calgary, Alberta was protected from development.

Surveyor

William Pearce was happiest when walking over vast stretches of land, measuring distances and angles, contours and elevations, a trail of pipe smoke behind him.

As a land surveyor in the Northwest in the 1870s and '80s, Pearce travelled thousands of miles – much of it on foot. He walked the West with the steady, even stride of a surveyor, 2,000 steps to a mile, sometimes travelling further and faster in a day than most men could travel on horseback.

After moving to Calgary in 1887, Pearce continued his work in the field, advising on lands and resources stretching from the Rockies to Manitoba. In 1904 he left the government to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway's irrigation scheme, which launched a five year resource survey.

Born: February 1, 1848 – Died: March 3, 1930

Additional Resources

- **Dictionary of Canadian Biography**
http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/pearce_william_15E.html
- **Government of Canada | National Historic Person**
https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=888

Our Collections

Glenbow Museum

<https://www.glenbow.org>

Glenbow Western Research Centre | Glenbow Library and Archives

<https://libguides.ucalgary.ca/glenbowlibraryandarchives>

Glenbow Library and Archives | Digital Collection

<https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340826N9XM?WS=PackagePres&Flat=1>