

## A. F. COVENTRY, 1888-1973

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Alan Freeth Coventry died suddenly outside his home near Streetsville, Ontario on February 18th, 1973. On his death Canada lost a man who had become a legend in his lifetime, as a teacher and a leader in the fields of natural history and the conservation of natural resources. "Covers," as he was known to many of his students and all of his many friends and associates, was born in London, England, on September 23rd, 1888. He went to day school in the county of Surrey and later to Willaston, a Public School in Cheshire, in the north of England. ("Public Schools" are actually the private secondary schools of England.) Long before he went to Willaston, however, his interest in natural history had been awakened. "From our earliest days," wrote Coventry's sister, "we children were encouraged to take an interest in the world around us, and particularly in nature. Our father was a keen naturalist, and we used to go for long walks with him, which were always made interesting by the many things he was able to tell us and show us on our way." Covers as a boy started one of several collections of wild flowers he made during his lifetime.

At Willaston, Coventry had the good fortune to come under the influence of a Swiss science master, A. D. Tobler, a very fine teacher and enthusiastic naturalist. This contact must have given him a great stimulus and no doubt helped him to gain an exhibition (equivalent to a scholarship) to Magdalen College at Oxford University. He became a Demonstrator in Zoology during his undergraduate years and took his degree in Natural Science in 1910. A slim but powerful man, he somehow found time to become stroke of his College eight in rowing, with conspicuous success.

Shortly after graduation he worked with the staff of the Zoological Society's gardens at the London Zoo. But he got his real start as a professional zoologist by accepting a new post, curator of a new museum established at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, off the coast of Scotland. There was already a flourishing natural history society there. He proceeded to organize the collecting and naming of the many marine invertebrates and fish, and to work on the exhibits. He acquired a rowboat and greatly increased the collections. He also began a herbarium of the local flora. It is interesting to note that his assistant for a time at the museum was a fifteen-year-old girl, Sheila M. Marshall, now a world authority on marine copepods.

Seeking to advance himself, Alan Coventry returned to England and after a brief interval of teaching he made the last move in his professional lifetime, to the University of Toronto, where he was appointed Lecturer in Vertebrate Embryology in 1912. During the First World War he was active as a Signals and Intelligence Officer, and also served in Europe in the Canadian Tank Battalion. He then continued to lecture in Toronto, and by 1941 he had become a full Professor. When he retired as Professor Emeritus in 1956, the university lost one of the few "characters" from its campus. Coventry was extremely rugged and virtually oblivious to heat and cold. He wore leather shorts (bought in Czechoslovakia) whenever he was on field trips, in all weathers, summer and winter alike, including subzero temperatures. In his classrooms he habitually affected the same ruggedness and deshabelle which not only amused but also endeared.

A bachelor, Coventry lived in a suite of rooms at the top of Hart House (the University



intellectual, social, and athletic center for males). To these rooms he invited many undergraduate and graduate members for a "dish of tea" and conversation late into the evening. Perhaps this was what kept Coventry so young at heart for so long, but it was a two-way street. No one left without new ideas, and often new plans as well.

### Natural History Interests

Most naturalists have a special interest in some form or group of animal or plant life. Coventry was not of this breed. To him the whole world of nature was of absorbing interest. He could be equally delighted by the antics of the large dock spider *Dolomedes*, the beauty of a calypso orchid, or the arrival of some early migrant shorebird. While his interests were extremely catholic he did know a few areas particularly well. Within fifty miles of Toronto he seemed to know every ravine, beach, back road, woodland, and pasture. He went frequently to Frank's Bay, Lake Nipissing, when the Ontario Fisheries Research Laboratory was located there. He was welcomed not only for his remarkable background of knowledge on almost any subject, and his ready wit, but also for a characteristic less common, in that he was a very sympathetic listener. By 1931 he had acquired four acres on Lake Timagami, in northern Ontario. This was Lynx Island, in one of the remoter parts of the lake. There, all alone, with great ingenuity, he built a summer cottage. His island was close to the little-known Forma Rosea Bay, so named because at that time it was the only known station in Ontario for *Castalia odorata* forma *rosea*, as it was then called. It is, of course, the pink form of the scented water lily, now *Nymphaea*. Coventry knew the little bay well but told its secret to few.

When at Lynx Island Coventry continued a project already begun elsewhere, the assessment of populations of small mammals, particularly *Peromyscus*, *Blarina*, and *Sorex*. He had started with *Microtus* populations around Toronto. It is now known from much more recent research that his estimates of popula-

tions were much too high, but he was working at a time when little attention had been paid to small mammal numbers.

Lake Timagami is a maze of winding bays; it contains more than twelve hundred islands and has, of course, much spectacular scenery. Here Coventry had full scope for one of his favorite hobbies, photography. He was a superb photographer and carried excellent equipment in the days before it was commonplace to do so. It is not surprising that for more than twenty years he was chairman of the Hart House Camera Club, and was responsible for the installation of much of the sophisticated developing and enlarging equipment there.

In 1934 Coventry was the leader of a group of sixteen naturalists who built a large but well-hidden cabin in a little-known forested gorge under a cliff in the Niagara escarpment, west of Milton, Ontario. A small spring of excellent water seeped out of the limestone talus a few feet from the cabin, which had sleeping accommodation for seven. Over a period of twenty years Coventry spent hundreds of weekends alone or with other members there. Phenological records of first flowering of plants, and bird and mammal observations were on charts on the walls of the cabin. There was a long bench for dissection of specimens, and the syndicate had its own plant collection. No path was made to the cabin, and it remained undetected and without vandalism for twenty-five years. The area had a surprising variety of habitats. The great shaded rocks of the talus slopes were covered with mosses of many species and with many ferns, including *Asplenium trichomanes* (maidenhair spleenwort) and *Camptosorus rhizophyllus* (walking fern). Hawks and vultures soared in the up-currents near the edge of the cliff-tops. Farther down in the valley a small trout stream meandered through an alder swamp. A short climb took one to a unique seven-acre pothole lake in the limestone, more than 70 feet deep and having at the proper time, in the leafy shallows near the surface, great numbers of newts in their pre-nuptial exercises. Coventry the scientist was fascinated by such phenomena; but as a natur-





"Covers" at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Summer Nature School at Camp Billie Bear, Muskoka District, Ontario, 1946. Photograph by Barbara E. Jaquith.

alist he seemed even more moved by the ethereal flute-like song of the Hermit Thrushes in the hardwoods surrounding the cabin.

He was an ardent member of the Brodie Club, a group of dedicated field-naturalists who meet regularly in the Royal Ontario Museum

in Toronto. Coventry was also an active member of the Toronto Field-naturalists' Club. By 1931 there were twelve nature clubs in Ontario, but there was no particular contact between them. At a meeting of the Brodie Club, Coventry and two of his lifelong friends, J. R.



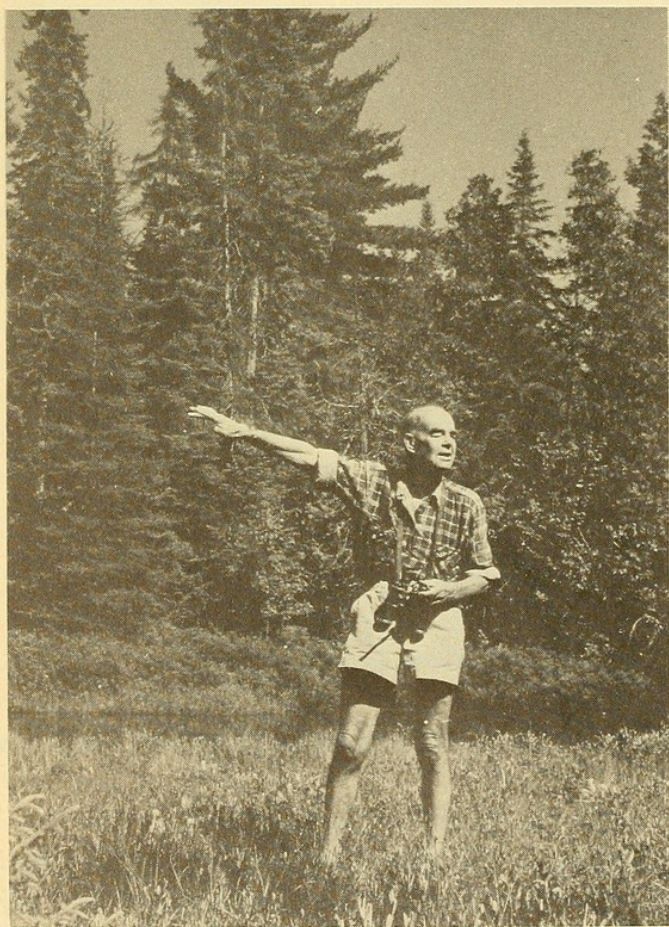
Dymond and T. F. McIlwraith, were asked to find means to carry out a union of all these clubs. Their report was adopted, and after some correspondence the Federation of Ontario Naturalists came into being, with Coventry as Secretary-Treasurer. In 1935 he presented the first brief on behalf of the Federation to the Ontario Legislative Committee on Game and Fish. The Federation grew and prospered continuously until it has now become one of the most influential organizations of its kind in Canada, and has had considerable effect on government policies. Coventry remained on the executive for many years, and at the time of his death was Honorary President. He received the F.O.N. Conservation Award in 1971.

The Federation of Ontario Naturalists has long sponsored summer camps for nature study,

first at Franklin Island, Georgian Bay, later near Huntsville, and now at Red Bay in the Bruce Peninsula, on Lake Huron. Coventry organized and ran the camp during several summers, and for many years was one of the leaders on the daily hikes. While other leaders were specialists in ornithology, botany, and entomology, Coventry concentrated on the whole animate and inanimate system. He tried to make his group understand the complex relationships between soil, water, and every form of life. His message never failed to infect the other campers. The mind and feelings that left this message are best described in a letter from Alice Ironside, a former graduate student, as follows, "A sense of wonder, an appreciation of beauty, keen powers of observation and an insatiable curiosity may well have been responsible for much of his enjoyment of life, his contribution to it and the success he achieved."

Mrs. Mary Devitt supplied a good example of his wit, which was a feature of the summer camps. "At the lunch table someone mentioned that no snakes had been reported at the camp. I had been wandering around myself that morning and had seen a striped one and I stated this. Covers asked me to describe it in detail, stripes and all. By this time every one at the table was listening. He then asked 'Mary, are you sure that it wasn't a chipmunk travelling fast?'"

His retirement from academic life in 1956 brought him even closer to nature. He settled into a small frame house on an unhurried side-road in farming country, and made a garden of old-fashioned English flowers. After joining the South Peel Naturalists' Club he proceeded to make a comprehensive collection of the flowering plants of Peel County. He sent a note to England about this phase of his life, as follows, "Putting into order the specimens I collect during the summer is a time-consuming business, but enjoyable; each specimen as it is mounted and labelled recalls some pleasant day in the open and some interesting place, sometimes new, sometimes often visited, for to a naturalist no place is ever quite the same as it was on other occasions."



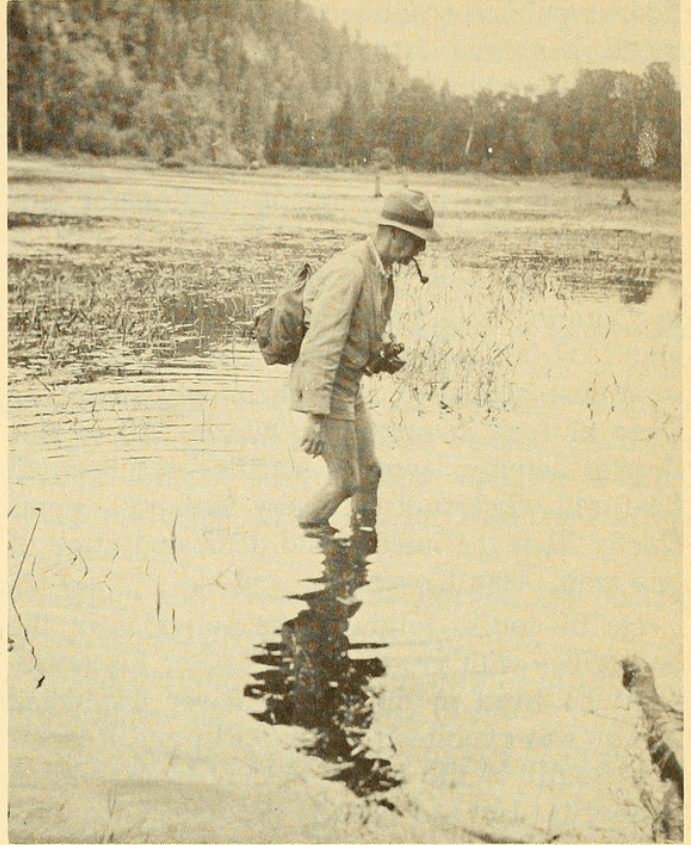
"Covers" in a Calopogon bog at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Summer Nature School at Camp Billie Bear, Muskoka District, Ontario, July 12, 1963. Photograph by Martin Edwards.



Coventry left his collections of plants to Erindale College of the University of Toronto. He continued his interest in photography and gave occasional illustrated lectures at the college and to other groups. His vast collection of black-and-white photographs and color slides have also found their way to Erindale College. Many of them have historical significance, besides being works of art. For his great contribution to the study of natural history he was elected an Honorary Member of *The Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club* in 1971.

### Conservation Interests

Coventry's greatest and most far-reaching success was in the field of conservation. In the depression of the early thirties, as droughts, floods, and erosion became more devastating south of the border he linked them together, much as Hugh Hammond Bennet was doing as Chief of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service. Bennet was probably the world's greatest conservationist and Coventry avidly read his superb articles and books and may well have met him. By 1935 Coventry was convinced that the same situation was occurring in much of southern Ontario and that something should be done about it. He felt that many ground water levels had become lower. (He did not know that the Dominion Government's staff had come to the same conclusion from well surveys over several counties.) He visited many of the eroded areas in Ontario, some of them with Charles Elton of Oxford, and this writer. He knew that some pilot project was needed. He proceeded to locate a small area for detailed survey, to find a sponsor for the work, and, with two of his colleagues in the University, to staff the project and organize it, with full cooperation from the local municipal council. The result, *A Report on the Natural Resources of King Township*, made headlines in the Toronto papers. Under the auspices of the Royal Canadian Institute, Coventry then gave a brilliant lecture on the report. Recommendations for new methods of cultivation, such as contour plowing and much reforestation were included in the report. Unfortunately both Dominion and Provincial



"Covers" at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Summer Nature School at Camp Billie Bear, Muskoka District, Ontario, 1945. Photographer unknown. Photograph supplied by Barbara E. Jaquith.

Governments were loath to begin costly conservation work.

Coventry did not despair. He quietly continued to lecture, talk, and write about floods and erosion. He calculated the amount of silt going down typical rivers in floods. He was given much support by Watson Porter, Editor of *The Farmers Advocate*. Soon he had influenced so many people that, with others, he was able to organize a large conference of Federal and Provincial leaders known as the Guelph Conference. The two governments were by now so aroused by public opinion that they allotted funds for a larger-scale survey of the watershed of the Ganaraska River. The report on this survey forced the hand of the Ontario Government, which therefore now included a Conservation Branch in the new Department of Planning and Development, and passed the Conservation Authorities Act of 1946. This Act allows groups of municipalities to control



floods, publicize and control erosion, recommend improved farming practices, carry out reforestation, and improve conditions generally for wildlife and public outdoor recreation. The work is funded by municipal levies, greatly assisted by provincial, and in some cases federal, grants.

There are now 38 conservation authorities in Ontario, including within their boundaries about 32,000 square miles. Southern Ontario is almost blanketed with them and there are three or four in northern Ontario. All of this diverse activity, with its startling results, and field and office staffs in every authority, stems chiefly from the intense and dedicated work of one man, Alan Coventry.

He of course followed the activities of the authorities with great interest. After his retirement he lived in the Credit River watershed and he was appointed to the Parks and Recreation Board of the Credit Valley Conservation Authority. He had already recommended successfully the acquisition of the Cold Creek Swamp, a tiny and fragile community of more northern acid-tolerant plants growing in sphagnum, such as the smaller species of *Vaccinium*. This swamp was also found to contain a rare species of moss new to Canada. A board-walk was built to keep visitors from spoiling the area, which lies about twenty-five miles northwest of Toronto. Later he spurred the acquisition of another similar community of northern plants southwest of Orangeville.

The Conservation Council of Ontario is an organization that is greatly indebted to Coventry. It came about in this fashion. When the Canadian National Sportsmen's Show in Toronto began to have large profits its sponsors (a group from the Toronto Anglers and Hunters, headed by Frank Kortright) decided to put its profits into conservation. The best advice received came from three professors — Coventry, J. R. Dymond and T. F. McIlwraith. They recommended using some of the profits to set up the Council, an organization with a small permanent staff and an unpaid group of invited specialists in the various fields of conservation. The Council holds many meetings,

both open and closed to the public, publishes unbiased reports on conservation, and advises the provincial government. Other profits have been passed out in grants for fish and wildlife research. This is just another example of the manner in which Coventry and his friends made their knowledge and influence felt.

### Education and Scientific Interests

Coventry was an extraordinarily gifted and enthusiastic teacher. Perhaps he is best remembered for the exciting introductory classes in zoology to students in Honour Science and Forestry. Countless undergraduates listened with something like amazement to his brilliantly organized lectures, expressed in concise and faultless English, and accompanied by first-class drawings. He never resorted to witticisms but always received rapt attention. He had one unique skill. With consummate ease and a piece of chalk in each hand he could draw on the blackboard either a perfect circle or any convolutions of a bilaterally symmetrical animal. Using his wide knowledge of literature and history, he gave an inspiring course on the History of Biology during his later years at the university. He was a competent vertebrate embryologist and his lectures to senior students were also flawless expositions. Indeed he introduced some modern teaching methods to his embryology course; for example, he made and used excellent models that illustrated various stages of the development of embryos he studied. Many of these were from small mammals he trapped at Timagami.

Caught up and immersed in the world of teaching, and without an ounce of vanity in his make-up, Coventry never bothered to take a Ph.D. degree himself. He of course supervised the studies of many graduate students, and while some of the studies concerned vertebrate embryology, others included the ecology of birds, mammals and fishes. Coventry's horizon was constantly expanding and he was certainly one of Canada's pioneer students in ecology. Meanwhile the door of his office was always open, and he was a source of inspiration to all



who came to visit him. As mentioned earlier these visits extended far beyond the laboratories.

Although he did not publish many scientific papers, he was always interested in expanding what was known of natural history. In particular, he liked to discover extensions of the known ranges of plants. For example, he was the first to note the presence of *Phyllitis scolopendrium* var. *americana* (Hart's-tongue fern) in the Credit watershed, a considerable extension of its known range. He may not have reported this officially, as he was always afraid that such action might result in the wiping out of a small station of plants.

This writer is not competent to assess Coventry's research output, which was not great in quantity but is reported to have been of high quality. Of this, Dennis Chitty, a former student, now a professor at the University of British Columbia, wrote in a tribute: "Covers was not endowed with that fanatical form of tunnel vision which makes a person think some tiny abstract problem is of more importance than all the rest of human experience . . . In

those far-off benighted days no one worried too much about a professor's research output. He was there to educate the young; if, in the course of so doing he played around with problems himself, so much the better for the education of the young."

### His Legacy

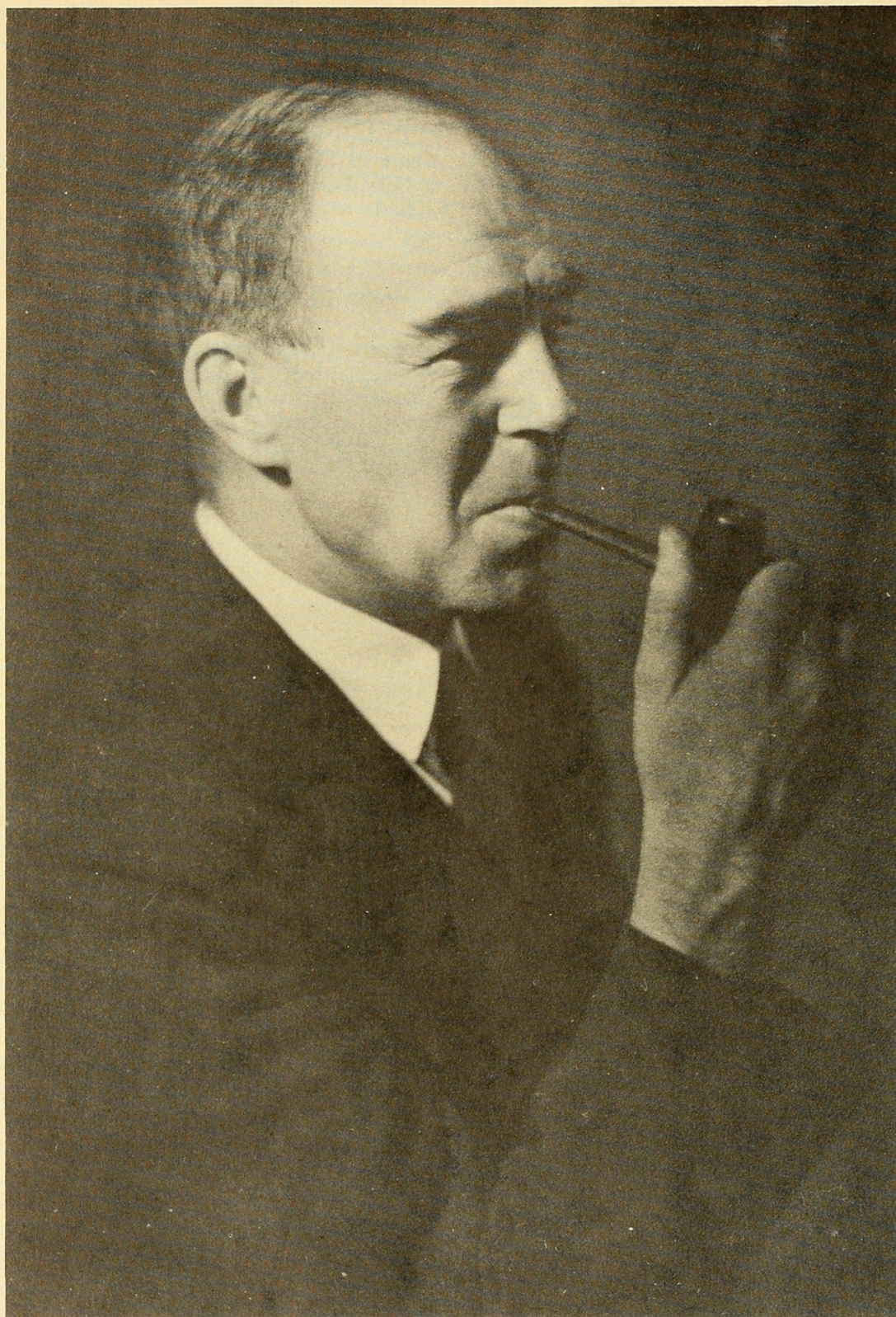
Coventry left a double legacy, a generation of enlightened men and women, and a great improvement in the face of Ontario, setting a prime example for the rest of Canada. He never sought fame or fortune. His need was a small one, perfectly expressed in Thomas Hardy's "Afterwards".

When the Present has latched its postern  
behind my tremulous stay,  
And the May month flaps its glad green  
leaves like wings,  
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the  
neighbours say  
"He was a man who used to notice such  
things"?

\* \* \* \* \*

A small memorial to Coventry, an annual prize "The Alan Coventry Memorial Prize in Conservation and Wildlife Protection" will be established at Erindale College. The college will receive contributions, issue receipts for income tax purposes, and will administer the fund and prize. Checks should be made payable to Erindale College and sent to the college at 3359 Mississauga Road, Clarkson, Ontario; they should be designated for the Alan Coventry Memorial Prize and for the attention of Dr. J. Tuzo Wilson, President. This prize will be a small but continuing memorial to a man who made great contributions to Canada and to generations of students and close friends.





**Alan Freeth Coventry**

Photograph by J. R. MacDonald in the thirties.





Mayall, Kenneth M. 1974. "A. F. Coventry, 1888-1973 [Obituary]." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 88(1), 99-105. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.344345>.

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