

Dictionary of Canadian Biography

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WATT, DAVID ALLAN POE (known until 9 June 1862 as **David Allan Poe**), merchant, lobbyist, and social reformer; b. 1830 and was christened 6 April in Ayrshire, Scotland, son of John Poe and Janet Watt; m. 24 June 1857 Frances Macintosh (d. 1876) in Montreal, and they had a son and three daughters; d. there 13 Dec. 1917.

Said to be of “seafaring stock,” David Allan Poe was educated in grammar schools in Greenock, Scotland, before arriving in Montreal in 1846 under indentures to his uncle James R. Orr, a prominent importer and commission merchant. On completion of his service he entered the mercantile trade as a commission merchant and broker specializing in produce. For reasons that are not clear, he had his family name and that of his wife and children changed by statute in 1862 to Watt, his mother’s family name. By 1869 he had given up his business to accept an appointment as manager of the Montreal Warehousing Company. In 1873, with Andrew **Allan***, George Alexander **Drummond***, and several others, he was an incorporator of the Merchants’ Warehousing Company and he was named manager of the firm that year. Around 1882 he again went into business for himself as a broker and later he became a grain merchant. In 1912, while he gradually withdrew from the grain business, he took on the additional post of manager of North American export freight for Hugh **Allan***’s Montreal Ocean Steamship Company (known as the Allan Line), a post he would hold until his death.

Watt worked tirelessly throughout his career to protect and promote the commercial interests of Montreal merchants. He served as treasurer of the Montreal Board of Trade from 1862 to 1865. In 1862 he helped organize the Montreal Corn Exchange Association and he served on its committee of management in 1863–64. He promoted the exchange’s federation with the Board of Trade, which would take place in 1886. A persistent advocate of free trade, he had organized the Free Navigation League, dedicated to the abolition of all shipping dues and tolls on the St Lawrence River from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. The league had been partially and temporarily successful in 1860 when Alexander Tilloch **Galt***, responsible for the Department of Finance, removed canal tolls. A lobbyist for Montreal’s import merchants and ocean carriers, in 1879 he petitioned Samuel Leonard **Tilley***, the federal minister of finance, objecting to proposed tariff and customs legislation that

would establish the taxable value of imports at the port of export, a measure which he argued was a form of “legalized extortion,” inimical to importers of European goods and to transatlantic carriers. In 1888 the Montreal merchants expressed their gratitude to Watt for his role in persuading the federal government to relieve Montreal harbour of the burden of administering the dues for the channel in Lac Saint-Pierre, effectively making Montreal a free port for ships. They presented Watt with an address and a cup containing 500 sovereigns. Two years later he and Andrew Allan petitioned the Senate on behalf of the shipping interests of Montreal, protesting against the authorization given by the government for the construction of additional bridges across the St Lawrence River. In 1903, despite the fact that he considered himself a Liberal imperialist, Watt opposed the proposals for imperial preference put forth by British politician Joseph Chamberlain, because they conflicted with his views on free trade.

Watt participated actively in the cultural, artistic, religious, and scientific life of the city. A devout Presbyterian, he was a member of Erskine Church in Montreal. He was a life member of the Natural History Society of Montreal, acted as its vice-president, and sat on its council and various committees. From 1862 to 1865 he was general editor of its bimonthly journal, the *Canadian Naturalist*, and later he served on its editorial committee. He collected specimens of fish and plants and was considered an authority on ferns. During the 1860s he began work on a catalogue of Canadian plants and got friends to help collect samples. In 1885 the executive of the British Association for the Advancement of Science’s Montreal committee, of which he was a member, presented him with a gold watch for his contribution to the success of the association’s meeting in Montreal the previous year. One of the original subscribers of the Art Association of Montreal in 1860, Watt served on its council from 1893 to 1895, as well as on its committees; in 1895 he was elected a life governor. He also appears to have been a collector of handicrafts, especially of Venetian and English embroidery.

Described as an advanced radical and an “energetic and able publicist,” Watt was a founder of the Good Government Association of Montreal and of the Citizens’ League of Montreal. He believed in adult suffrage for both sexes, but with educational and residential requirements, and he was a persistent advocate of the abolition of all barriers to the education of women. His best-known work was as the “moving spirit” behind the Society for the Protection of Women and Children. Watt worked tirelessly and his writings on the subject are said to have been “voluminous.” In 1892 he asked the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to endorse his campaign to persuade the federal government that sections of the criminal law should be amended to protect minors, particularly young girls, from “debauchery.” The assembly postponed *sine die* consideration of the subject. In a nine-page petition he had presented to the same body in 1885 he had described the existing legislation as

inadequate since it offered little protection to minors, immoral in that it failed to punish the perpetrators of crimes, and unjust because it made a clear distinction between rich and poor.

Politicians, including the minister of justice, John Sparrow David **Thompson***, seemed more receptive to his arguments. Among other revisions, the new Criminal Code of 1892 amended the objectionable sections to provide greater protection of minors from “defilement” and prostitution. Not only did it raise the age of consent for all females to 18 years, it increased the age of “unlawful harbouring in a brothel” to 20 years and for the first time included in this provision minors of both sexes.

A studious, contemplative man of broad intellectual interests and social commitments, Watt employed his incisive mind and his sharp pen to secure a comfortable livelihood and to strive for the betterment of society.

CARMAN MILLER

David Allan Poe Watt is the author of three pamphlets: *An open letter to the Hon. the minister of finance in re “tariff of customs”* (Montreal, 1879); *Immoral legislation: a statement printed (but not published) for the information of the commissioners of the Presbyterian Church in Canada meeting in general assembly, Montreal, June 10, 1885* (n.p., n.d.); and *Moral legislation: a statement prepared for the information of the Senate* (Montreal, 1890).

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General Bibliography

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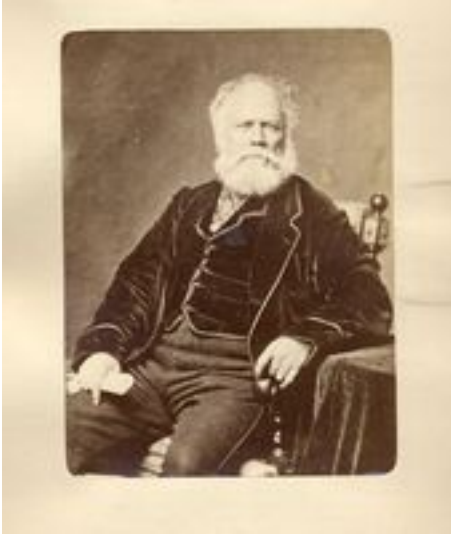
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