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# The Outcomes of the Life of a Geologist: *An Autobiography* By T. Nelson Dale 1846-1937

To read Dale's autobiography is to encounter the sweep of history his life spans. He was born when Henry David Thoreau was living at Walden Pond, but did not die before telephones and rural electrification had reached such places, and New England as a rural agricultural society powered by the horse had become a largely industrial manufacturing society powered by petroleum. His professional life encompassed the eras of Civil War reconstruction, European grand tours and America's Gilded Age, when government patrimony and corruption adversely affected Dale's career.

Then there is his personal story: the family soap opera of riches to rags, an aborted education, a "boy's will." Later comes the test of his stamina. He spent four decades working to analyze and map the structure of an enormous piece of ground, walking and riding on terrible roads, trails, and pasture paths to produce handcrafted geological reports and maps for the U.S. Geological Survey.

*The Outcomes of the Life of a Geologist* contains no list of laudations by scientific societies or summaries of monographs that changed the course of a discipline. T. Nelson Dale's "outcomes" are personal revelations of an intense, almost heroic, engagement with the earth that sums up to a life (1846-1937) well worth reading about.

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Most appealing to me is its quirkiness. The book ends with a very old man giving younger field geologists tips for repelling mosquitoes, preventing dog attacks, easing poison ivy and constructing a ventilated hat. His various fieldwork encounters, also quirky, included the old farm woman whose stone walls were ten feet thick, a "veritable fortification" of boulders; and the curious gentleman who collected fossilized nuts from a Tertiary lignite deposit near Brandon, Vermont.

It is the inner psychological story of his old age that I found most compelling. T. Nelson Dale was a courageous man who engaged fully with all the messiness of life, physically, mentally and spiritually. Of all the autobiographies I've ever read, *The Outcomes of the Life of a Geologist* most resembles the much more famous *The Education of Henry Adams*.

----**Robert M. Thorson**  
*Professor of Geology*  
*University of Connecticut*

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