

# NATURE, ORDER, AND CHAOS IN JOHN DAVIDSON'S ARCHIVE

## *A Photo Essay*

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**B**OTANIST JOHN DAVIDSON, FLS, FBSE (1878-1970), was preoccupied by the question of humanity's proper relationship with nature. His answer was shaped by natural theology, which taught that God and God's plan for the world was made visible in the environment, or, to use his preferred phrase, through natural history. Davidson saw law and order in nature and believed that humankind had a duty to learn nature's laws and live within them. Everywhere he looked, people were creating chaos where formerly there had been harmony.<sup>1</sup> Davidson's archive – comprised of photographs, speech texts, correspondence, maps, artworks, and herbarium sheets – gives insight into early twentieth-century environmental change as well as into popular attempts to mitigate the most blatant of those transformations. As a voluminous visual argument for nature study, environmental conservation, and park creation, John Davidson's photographs are a counter-point to the more pro-development stance of many of his contemporaries, notably John William Clark.<sup>2</sup> Like Clark, Davidson gave many lectures illustrated by magic lantern slides (between 1911 and 1951 Davidson gave 213 lectures to 104 different organizations).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Clark's presentations, however, Davidson's popular presentations brought a proto-environmentalist impulse to thousands of British Columbians.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Davidson, "The Morality of Plants," *British Columbia Monthly* 17, 4 (February 1921): 13-15; *ibid.*, 5 (May 1921): 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> James Murton, "What J.W. Clark Saw in British Columbia, or, Nature and the Machine: A Photo Essay," *BC Studies* 142/43 (2004): 129-52.

<sup>3</sup> John Davidson, "A Scottish Emigrant's Contribution to Canada: Record of Publications and Public Lectures, 1911-1961," self-published, 1961, UBC Special Collections, Z8218.5.D3.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson's legacy is evident in the visible landscape and in the City of Vancouver Archives, UBC Archives, the UBC Botanical Garden, and the UBC Herbarium. Portions of Davidson's archive, including all of his photographs, have been united in a virtual space. See *John Davidson: The Legacy of a Canadian Botanist/L'héritage d'un botaniste Canadien*, <http://www.botanyjohn.org>.



Figure 1. "J.D. Cyclist," unknown photographer, n.d., University of British Columbia Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research, John Davidson Lantern Slide 60. Image and metadata also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbg-slides/2005\\_680\\_0060.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbg-slides/2005_680_0060.jpg.html).

Davidson arrived in Vancouver in 1911; his wife and young children followed soon thereafter. Born into a working-class family in Aberdeen, Scotland, he had pursued a modest botanical career at Marischal College. Davidson did this to the extent that he could without a university degree, in a highly class-conscious and hierarchical society, at a time when amateur natural history was being slowly eclipsed in professional scientific circles by ecology and formal credentials. His career in Aberdeen stalled, and rumours of a new provincial university in a distant corner of the Empire spawned hope that he could escape the limitations of his background.<sup>5</sup>

Davidson was shocked by what he discovered in British Columbia. He arrived during an economic boom and at a time of profound ecological change. Davidson had come expecting to vault himself to scientific fame by discovering, naming, and describing plant species previously unknown to botany. Instead, flabbergasted, he realized that, without a project of salvage botany, there would be no complete record of the species that had formerly occupied the city site. Figure 2, "Slash after logging," exemplifies the chaos that Davidson associated with human intervention in nature's affairs. The photo of slash, the debris left after the removal of commercially valuable timber, is framed in such a way as to place the viewer inside the clearcut and gives the impression of total annihilation. Logging itself was the least laborious aspect of land-clearing, however. Figure 3, "Blasting stump," captures the moment of detonation as the explosive shatters the stump of a large tree. Shot with the horizon close to the bottom of the frame, the spray of dirt appears to dwarf the house in the background. Finally, Figure 4, "Land clearing," portrays a pyramid of slash piled for burning. At the base of the heap, the diminutive Davidson emphasizes the enormity of the environmental degradation under way. Again, the horizon is very low in the image, and the emphasis on the empty sky heightens the sense of desolation. The forest's edge in the far background, behind the standing snags or dead trees, awaits a similar fate.

<sup>5</sup> City of Vancouver Archives MSS 505, John Davidson fonds, 565-F-7, file 1, "Biographical Sketches of John Davidson and Mary Gruchy," as written by Edna C. Davidson (Davidson's widow), August 1987. See also 565-F-7, file 3, "JD Born 6th Aug 1878."

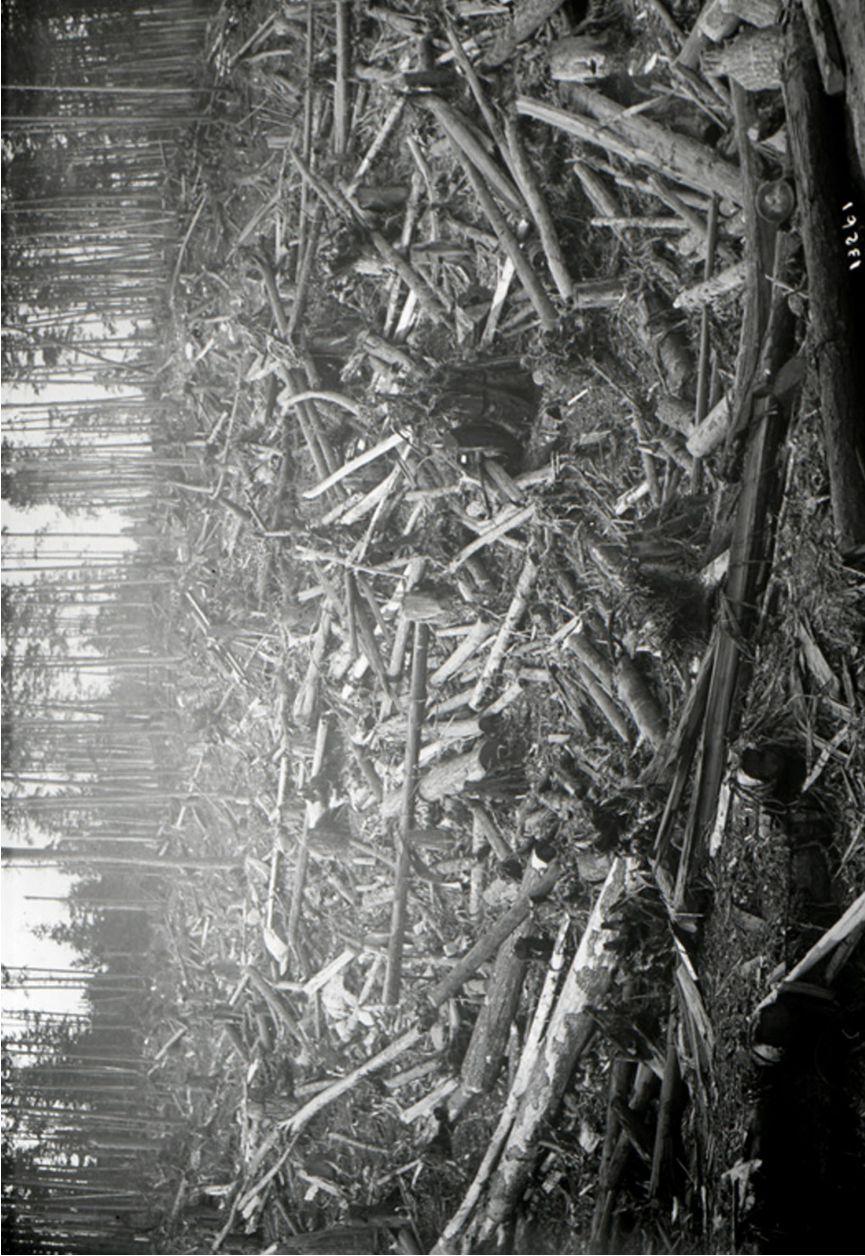


Figure 2. "Slash after logging," n.d., University of British Columbia Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research, John Davidson Lantern Slide 592. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005\\_680\\_0592.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005_680_0592.jpg.html).



Figure 3. "Blasting stump," ca. 1911, University of British Columbia Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research, John Davidson Lantern Slide 591. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005\\_680\\_0591.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005_680_0591.jpg.html).



Figure 4. "Land clearing," ca. 1914, photograph by Jean Davidson, City of Vancouver Archives, cva 660-331. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007\\_660\\_0331.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007_660_0331.jpg.html).

This mess of stumps, fire scars, and bushy second growth, and his professional duties as newly appointed provincial botanist and, later, professor at UBC, led Davidson to advocate City Beautiful principles and to initiate a civic Arbor Day. He believed that the orderly reintroduction of native trees and flowers into the now decrepit cityscape was essential to raising a virtuous younger generation. Figure 5, "Land sale," an image taken between 1915 and 1917, shows Vancouver at what Davidson considered its worst. With the tree cover gone, the ground is eroding into a muddy wasteland. The few modest houses do nothing to compensate for the ruin. However, Figure 6, "City beautification," taken a few short years later in an adjacent part of the city, provides an example of the antidote. In time, the private gardens and wide tree-lined boulevards would compensate for the flora removed during the city's creation.



Figure 5. "Land sale," view of land sales property, possibly near West 42nd Ave and West Boulevard, ca. 1915-17, City of Vancouver Archives, cVA 660-344. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007\\_660\\_0344.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007_660_0344.jpg.html).



Figure 6. "City beautification," view of planted trees on 12th Avenue West and Spruce, ca. 1920, City of Vancouver Archives, cVA 660-002. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007\\_660\\_0002.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007_660_0002.jpg.html).



Figure 7. "John Davidson leading party on glacier," ca. 1928, University of British Columbia Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research, John Davidson Lantern Slide 244. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005\\_680\\_0244.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/ubcbgslides/2005_680_0244.jpg.html).





Figure 8. "Black Tusk and Helm Lake," Dorothy Ingram standing in meadow of wildflowers, ca. mid- to late 1910s, City of Vancouver Archives, cva 660-226. Image also available online at: [http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007\\_660\\_0226.jpg.html](http://botanyjohn.org/gallery/v/cvaslides/2007_660_0226.jpg.html).

Davidson's was not an outlook confined to the city limits. To gain access to more distant flora, he joined British Columbia Mountaineering Club expeditions and then initiated the club's natural history section. With so much development taking place in British Columbia, Davidson and other club members sought to protect some of their most cherished places as a provincial park. His many talks deployed photographs to support this project, and they created compelling propaganda to counter the predominant development message of the day. The natural history section especially wanted to preserve the Garibaldi area both to allow Vancouverites to learn about nature and to attract tourists. They were ultimately successful, in part because of Davidson's publicity campaign, a contribution memorialized in 1930 by the naming of Mount Davidson in the park.<sup>6</sup> Figure 7, descriptively entitled "John Davidson leading party on glacier," misrepresents Davidson's experience and masks how dependent he was on the skills and patience of mountaineers to gain access to alpine flora. The staged photograph depicts an ordered society and an ordered nature on a grand scale, vast in its beauty and in stark contrast to the jumble of development in Vancouver. The similar Figure 8, "Black Tusk and Helm Lake," is the sort of image that Davidson used in his talks to bring city dwellers into the mountains and to convince them of the necessity of park creation. Pictured are the alpine wildflowers that attracted Davidson to Garibaldi and drew him back to the area for years.

John Davidson saw a place for God's harmonious order in both the cityscape and the hinterland. He would go on to create the Vancouver Natural History Society and the UBC Botanical Garden and Herbarium – institutions that would help disseminate his understanding of the natural world. Davidson sought to instill into people a new sense of responsibility, which entailed replanting where humans had destroyed the native flora and constraining development where that native flora still existed. To this end, he used his photographs to great effect, generating wide support for his theologically inspired environmental agenda.

<sup>6</sup> Location: 49°36'52"N 122°54'15"W.