

Pass It On®...

The Janitor who Changed the World of Science.

What would you do with your free time if you were a janitor at a university? How about becoming the inspiration for the movie “Good Will Hunting”?

James Croll was born into abject poverty in 1821. From birth, a slight deformity on the front of his skull made him the target of mocking children and adults alike. As a result, he developed a withdrawn personality that he eventually turned into an advantage — and an inspiration for us even today.

The small farm in Scotland on which he grew up required long days of labor just to subsist. He had no formal education, although his parents taught him the basics. After a series of job failures, and nearly starving to death, he took a job as a janitor at Anderson’s College and Museum in Glasgow. He acquired two things with the job: enough money to live on, barely. And access to the school’s library.

Croll was an avid reader, obsessive about understanding the world in which he lived. He devoured science texts, following a trail of hypotheses through the shelves, taking notes and writing down his own theories. And he did something remarkable. After 16 years of self-guided study, he wrote to the authors of scientific papers and challenged their theories. One scientist who replied was Charles Darwin. There were others.

The next step was even more audacious. Croll began submitting his theories to scientific magazines. He did leave out a few details with his signature: “James Croll, Anderson’s Institution.” While he was technically employed by the college, he was still a janitor.

When the scientific community learned of his real occupation, they were astonished. Here was a humble man, self-taught, a hermit living in the library penning letters that challenged theories, and hypothesizing himself. On learning of Croll’s uncredentialed past, they could have dismissed him entirely. Instead, Darwin himself signed Croll’s certificate of nomination to join the ranks of The Royal Society, a fellowship of the world’s most eminent scientists.

The story of James Croll doesn’t end with his finally getting recognition for his theses. And it would be a happy story if all he had achieved was finally putting food on the table and living a comfortable life. But there is more: Croll, the former janitor, introduced a breakthrough in thought concerning the causes of climate change.

Croll’s paper would influence future scientists and contribute to the mathematical understanding of our solar system, the way our earth changes and how ice ages happen. The New Scientist credits Croll as “the father of climate change research.” Quite the feat for a poor farm boy who took a job as a janitor to put bread on the table and feed his curiosity at the same time.

Croll is a reminder to all of us that anything is possible if we just put our mind to it. And, as long as we have good books to read, there will be great discoveries that help us understand our world, and ourselves.

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