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The Reindeer Botanist: Alf Erling Porsild, 1901–1977

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THE REINDEER BOTANIST: ALF ERLING PORSILD, 1901–1977
by Wendy Dathan

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EPILOGUE

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

Nine years before Erling Porsild retired in 1967, Bassett Maguire at the New York Botanical Gardens said that for thirty years A. E. Porsild, Chief Botanist of the National Herbarium of Canada, had been “the outstanding field investigator of boreal American vegetation” and had unquestionably “contributed more to the botany of boreal America that any other botanist now living.” In what was to be the last decade of his life, Erling could justifiably wear that mantle of botanical achievement. He had earned it.¹

James Soper was appointed as Chief Botanist of the National Herbarium in 1967, and George Argus joined the staff in 1972. Erling was awarded the status of Curator Emeritus and given two small offices, free run of the Herbarium and the National Museum Library as well as access to secretarial services. Soper, who readily recognized that Erling Porsild’s major contribution to the Herbarium had been in its growth and world-wide recognition as a valuable resource centre for the study of Arctic Botany, said: “He never interfered with my administration of the Botany Division, and I rarely, if ever, approached him for advice on such matters. Throughout his career he abhorred administrative duties and did only the minimum, considering this as an unwelcome, if necessary, distraction from the serious work of carrying out research.”²

Although his health and strength were noticeably failing in those last years at the herbarium, Erling continued to work on the Rocky Mountain, Yukon, and Northwest Territories manuscripts as well as other papers, of which another dozen, alone or in partnership with others, were published in his lifetime. His friendly relationship with William J. (Bill) Cody, Curator of the Vascular Plant Herbarium at the Department of Agriculture from 1946 to 1988, was remarkable for the rise of helpful understanding that had begun to exist between
that department and the National Herbarium after the bitter territorial feuds of the earlier years. Erling was particularly interested in Cody’s extensive field work in the northwest, including his collection of plants around Reindeer Station in 1957 and again in 1963 to determine the effects of reindeer grazing. In 1966, they began to combine efforts to produce a 102-page “Checklist of the vascular plants of the Continental Northwest,” published by the Plant Research Institute of Agriculture Canada in 1968. A lengthened version of the checklist, 667 pages, “Vascular plants of the Continental Northwest Territories,” co-authored with Cody and published by the National Museum in 1980, was Erling’s last major work. In the end, one hundred and twenty-eight publications in all would be credited to Erling Porsild, a sure sign of his towering presence in the field of Arctic and subarctic Botany and the natural sciences over all his years in Canada.

Honours began to pour in after his retirement. In 1971, the Ottawa Field-Naturalists gave him an honorary membership for his many contributions to the Club, the Botanical Society of America gave him the annual Merit Award, and the Canadian Botanical Association presented him with the Lawson Medal for notable contributions to the advancement of Canadian Botany. He received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from Acadia University in Nova Scotia in 1967 and another from the University of Waterloo in Ontario in 1973, in recognition of his remarkable achievements in the field of Canadian Science.3

His death came unexpectedly in 1977. He and Margrit were on holiday in Vienna when he died suddenly on November 13. According to one of his memorial tributes, a small private funeral service was held for him in Vienna, after which he was cremated and his ashes prepared for burial on Disko Island.

Loris Russell paid his respects on behalf of the National Museum and the Royal Society of Canada. “Porsild was one of the last of those scientific explorers who laid the foundation of our knowledge of the Canadian Arctic and its plants, its animals, and its human inhabitants,” he said, and under his direction “the National Herbarium collection had almost quadrupled in number of specimens, and had expanded notably into the field of non-vascular plants.”4

T. J. Wood wrote that it was proper that the Arctic Circle pay tribute to the memory of one of its founders, who was also its first president and a long time member. “A. E. Porsild was my friend – a friendship spanning fifty years,” he said. “We shared a common interest in things pertaining to the Canadian North, and had long discussions on its future, especially that of its people. There were times of grief and those of joy…. An often recurring picture is that

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of him sitting writing at his desk turning out splendidly composed paragraphs on all manner of subjects; or, of him sitting at ease, smoking his pipe, and discoursing in gently-modulated tone of voice – with many a chuckle – on almost any subject imaginable, except religion. He is to me a memorable personality and now greatly missed.”

Hugh Raup quietly recalled how Erling had enlarged the National Herbarium and made it into a superb research tool, as well as producing the stream of publications based on his studies of the boreal American flora. “He was well known and highly respected among biologists in both America and Europe. His research was meticulous, and rested solidly upon a clear understanding of the materials he worked with and of the theoretical concepts within which he operated. He made major contributions to knowledge not only in the taxonomy of boreal American plants but also in their geographic and circumpolar relationships.” As one of his oldest friends, Raup would remember Erling as “a quiet man, shy and unassuming,” yet he could also say:

He went through life with what amounted to a rollicking, though curiously muted, sense of humour. He was an inspired raconteur, and his tales were nearly always built around amusing incidents. He had a keen sense of the ridiculous in the human foibles he came across, including his own, and enough respect for the imagination of his listeners to describe a situation in the fewest possible words and then leave them to see the humour of it in their own way. His life was a saga of unique experiences and accomplishments – an inspiration to all those who have faith in the capacities of an individual human mind that guides its possessor’s energies with imagination, tolerance and taste.6

On 30 December 1977, six weeks after Erling’s death in Vienna, Bob Porsild died in his sleep at his home in Whitehorse. The funeral service was held in the Trinity Lutheran Church where he and Elly had been among the founding members. In an article repeated in both the Whitehorse Star and the Yukon News, reporter Flo Whyard said: “A giant of a man, in more ways than one, is how Bob Porsild appeared to many Yukoners, and his death at 79 last Friday in Whitehorse has removed from the daily scene one of those quiet pioneers who helped to build this country.” He left behind, in Yukon and Alberta, his widow Elly, three daughters (Betty Seaborn, Ellen Davignon, and Jo Brown), one son Aksel, eleven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.7
Elly wrote to Richard Finnie to tell him that Bob “hadn’t been sick as such, but he was very tired and he never got over the death of his dear brother; they had so much in common in their love for nature and plants.” Margrit also wrote to him, saying that she knew how long his friendship went back with both Bob and Erling. “How strange that Bob died so soon after Erling…. Maybe you could write something about the two brothers.” In Finnie’s later article about “The Polar Porsilds,” he remembered all the pleasant visits he had had with both brothers and their families over the years. “As generous, warm-hearted hosts serving good food and drink in their homes, the brothers would joke and tell stories in their Danish-accented English about colourful characters and incidents in the North and elsewhere.” Unlike Erling, Bob had never had any honours heaped on him except local ones, he said, but ironically, after his death, Elly received a Queen’s Jubilee Medal that had been awarded to him “as an expression of appreciation of worthy and devoted service rendered and of the esteem in which he was held by his associates.” Elly remarked: “Bob would have loved it – the only one he ever got.”

It was left to Áskell Löve to write lyrically, as he closed the circle of the Porsilds’ lives: “When the nightless summer returned this spring to their beloved northlands, the ashes of the two great travelling brothers at last joined the arctic ecosystem of their youth in the family plot on Disko Island, where the sun shines all summer long and the northern lights pirouette during the arctic nights into vast eternity.” In his memorial tribute to the younger Porsild brother, Löve said that the importance of the works of great men was not easily appreciated by their contemporaries, but he felt that, in the future tribunal of scientific contributions, Erling Porsild would fare well. Meanwhile, they were

… allowed to admire his tremendous energy as exposed in his great plant collections; his profound learning and unusually sharp floristic eye as manifested in his essential works on the phytogeography of arctic-alpine regions in the Northern Hemisphere; his solid treatment of various entities of the arctic flora that he either was the first to describe or the last to rearrange on basis of new and brilliant observations; and especially his perseverance and literary skill that is mirrored in his many publications which place him among the most productive of Canadian and North American botanists and as one of the few all-time leaders in arctic botanical exploration.
In spite of all the glowing tributes at the time of Erling Porsild’s death, it is not a Canadian tradition, as Lester Pearson remarked of his friend Skelton in External Affairs, to create posthumous heroes of men of unsensational merit, especially influential men who were still relatively unknown in the popular domain because they had worked behind the scenes to follow their ideals and conscience with the utmost dedication to a larger cause. Despite Erling’s brief bursts into fame with his wartime return from Greenland and his very public dispute with Farley Mowat, despite his solid reputation among his scientific peers, it would not be long before the world would tend to leave him behind to become largely a forgotten man like his father before him. At the time of his retirement, he was already considered old-fashioned by the up and coming young scientists. Even his herbarium, with its emphasis on big expeditions into the field and huge collections in storage, was becoming questionably passé in a North America where most of the vegetation was now known, so that other kinds of specialists were taking the place of the last botanical explorers of whom Erling was unquestionably one of the giants.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, in the reindeer field he would be remembered, if he was remembered at all, as part of the half-forgotten, half-misrecalled history of yet another failed northern scheme by the Canadian Government that had not properly involved the First Nations people, and so he would not likely be given credit where credit was due. In the field of Botany, for a younger generation, perhaps he would be most remembered as being the man who gathered “all that boreal hay” for the National Herbarium, although he would still be known and respected for his flora of the Arctic Archipelago and his impressive reference work with Bill Cody on the “Vascular plants of the Continental Northwest Territories,” published in 1980 after his death. But perhaps the time is dawning for a new appreciation of what he accomplished in his lifetime to come up for our re-assessment. Appropriately, the Canadian Botanical Association has created the “Alf Erling Porsild Award” in his memory, “awarded in recognition of the best paper published in the field of systematics and phytogeography that year by a graduate student in a Canadian university or a Canadian student in a foreign university.” With our new awareness of what is happening in the north with glacial warming, we might want to re-examine his detailed phytogeographical information with a new eye as to what has changed and is changing in his land of the midnight sun.

Looking back at the symbolic return to Greenland of Erling Porsild’s ashes, it is not hard to see that it marked the end of a half-century journey that for him
had been difficult physically, emotionally, and professionally, but had at last brought him the rewards he so truly deserved. He had never stopped working to fulfil his own and his father’s ambitions to make a name for himself in the botanical field. He had done his best to make the northern reindeer developmental experiment a success even if it had failed to achieve its potential due to factors largely beyond his control. He had believed in and worked hard for the cause of northern science while diligently seeking to understand the flora of that vast and challenging land above and below the Arctic Circle, from Greenland to Boreal Canada to Alaska, not only in order to identify and classify it taxonomically but to work out the larger questions of origin and migration patterns. He had consistently sought to raise the awareness and standards of Botany in Canada and promote Canada’s achievements to the world. He had been a reliable consultant and participant in numerous scientific activities in the Canadian north, and he had won the approval of the British Empire for his important wartime contributions to his adopted country and his distinguished service thereafter.

Young Erling Porsild of Disko Island, who had gone to Canada all those years ago, had done very well indeed. He could, at last, rest in peace.
NOTES

CHAPTER ONE.
GREENLAND BEGINNINGS.

1 Family information in this chapter was acquired by sources quoted below, plus personal interview with Erling Porsild’s daughter Karin Lumsden and telephone conversation with brother Sten Porsild in Denmark, while longtime friend and consular colleague Trevor Lloyd supplied the legendary boyhood stories.


4 F. De Laguna, 1977, *Voyage to Greenland*. The writer was incorrect in naming the Porsild son as Erling, who was in Ottawa at that time. The son she met was Robert Porsild, visiting his parents while on leave from the Canadian Reindeer Project.

5 Craig et al., 1927, *Canada’s Arctic Islands*.


7 MPP to M. L. Fernald, 1 June 1922, NHF. First part of long letter to Professor Fernald at Harvard University regarding his son Erling’s qualifications quoted at length throughout this chapter.


CHAPTER TWO.
MALTE AND THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM.

2 For description of herbarium problems, see MOM to F. J. Lewis, 8 May 1924, NHF, and MOM to Chas. Cammell, Deputy Minister, Dept. of Mines, 20 Dec 1924, PAC/NHC, RG 132:20:332.


5 MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 2 Feb 1926, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.

6 For warning re: introduction of reindeer herding, see S. T. Wood to OSF, 1 Dec 1922; for overview of situation, see D. Jenness, 1964, Eskimo Administration; see also Maxwell Graham, 11 Aug 1925, Statement regarding the Reindeer Industry and its possibilities in Northern Canada, with special reference to the Northwest Territories, PAC/CRP.

7 W. W. Cory to OSF, 28 Jan 1926, and OSF to R. A. Gibson, 17 Feb 1926, PAC/CRP.

8 Maxwell Graham, 4 March 1926, Memorandum for Fyle, Dept. of the Interior, NWT and Yukon Branch, PAC/CRP.


CHAPTER THREE.
CALL OF THE NORTHWEST.

1 MOM to AEP, 23 March 1926, PAC/NHC, RG 132:31:449.


3 For official reaction to AEP’s letter, see OSF to AEP, 3 April 1926, OSF to R. A. Gibson, 19 April 1926, and L. D. Baldwin to W. W. Cory, 22 April 1926, PAC/CRP.

4 For the role of Anderson and Stefansson in the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913–18, see Wm. L. McKinley, 1976, Karluk, the Great Untold Story of Arctic Exploration; for letter of sympathy after death of her husband, see AEP to Mrs. Evelyn Stefansson, 27 Aug 1962, PAC/NHC, RG 132:34:483.

5 For RTP reaction, see Iris Warner collection, 1973–74, Yukon Archives, rough copy of article on CRP, undated and corrected by RTP; see also MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 7 May 1926, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.

6 R. M. Anderson to MPP, 25 June 1926, NHF.


9 MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 7 May 1926, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.

10 OSF to AEP and RTP, 19 May 1926, PAC/CRP.

11 S. Hadwen to OSF, 26 June 1926, PAC/CRP.

12 E. W. Nelson to L. J. Palmer, 6 May 1926, PAC/CRP.

CHAPTER FOUR.
IN SEARCH OF REINDEER.

1 Erling Porsild kept a field journal from 1926 to 1928. All quotes, descriptions, and activities in this and the remaining chapters in Part One can be assumed to come from this source, accessed by date, unless otherwise cited.

2 AEP, 1942, Reindeer/Caribou Grazing in Canada. Re: reindeer/caribou
CHAPTER SIX.
COASTAL ALASKA BY DOGSLED.

1 For commentary on Kleinschmidt’s “improvement” of Eskimo language, and connection with Leffingwell whose expedition Stefansson had been hired to join, and Archdeacon Stuck who escorted Stefansson to hospital at the end of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, see V. Stefansson, 1964, Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson.
2 Re: RTP quote, see Iris Warner collection, 1973–74, MS:B247, Yukon Archives.
3 Commonest large dextral shells in Arctic (up to 15 cm) are the whelks, family Buccinidae.

CHAPTER FIVE.
LITTLE DIOMEDE TO KOTZEBUE SOUND.

1 AEP to OSF, 8 Aug 1926, PAC/CRP.
3 AEP, 1938, Flora of Little Diomede Island.
4 D. Jenness, 1929, Diomede Islands.

2 AEP to OSF, 30 Sept 1926, PAC/CRP.
5 AEP to OSF, 2 Dec 1926, PAC/CRP.

12 AEP to OSF, 2 Dec 1926, PAC/CRP.
13 For official approval of the first season of studying reindeer in Alaska, see OSF to W. W. Cory, 17 Feb 1927; Leonard D. Baldwin to W. W. Cory, 30 Oct 1926; and W. W. Cory to Leonard D. Baldwin, 2 Nov 1926, PAC/CRP.
CHAPTER NINE.
SCHOONER TRAVEL ON THE ARCTIC COAST.

1 According to McPhail and Lindsey, 1970, *Freshwater Fishes of Northwestern Canada and Alaska*, arctic char was fished extensively by Inuvialuit along Arctic coast using handlines, jigs, spears, gillnets, and traps.

2 AEP to OSF, 15 Nov 1927, Preliminary Report on Field Work of the Summer of 1927, PAC/CRP.SCH

3 Bishop Stringer's collection was recorded by J. M. Macoun and Holm, 1921, *Vascular Plants*.

4 For story of floating iceberg expedition, see V. Stefansson, 1964, *Discovery*.

5 For first published use of term 'pingo,' see AEP, 1929, *Reindeer Grazing in Northwest Canada*, p. 32. For formal introduction of term, see AEP, 1938, *Earth Mounds in unglaciated arctic northwestern America*. See also, R. M. Anderson, 1917, Preliminary list of specimens collected by the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1914–16.

CHAPTER TEN.
RETURN TO AKLAVIK.

1 The journal gives no detail of the kind of evidence the Porsilds found that would indicate the site of an igloo 23–24 years after it had been used.

2 For difficulties of travelling along this shallow, stormy coast, and near-shipwreck of over-loaded *Bonnie Belle* one year later, see Metayer, 1966, *I, Nuligak*, pp. 165–66.

3 AEP to OSF, 13 Sept 1927, PAC/CRP.

4 Note the inordinate amount of time spent fishing in order to feed the dogs. For Arctic cisco, *Coregonius autumnalis*, the most important fish for dogfood at Aklavik, see McPhail and Lindsey, 1970, *Freshwater Fishes of Northwestern Canada and Alaska*. 

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7 AEP to OSF, 26 June 1927, PAC/CRP.

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CHAPTER SEVEN.
TRAVELLING ALONE: AN ACCIDENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

1 Ernest de K. Leffingwell, 1919, *The Canning River Region*.


4 For estimated decimation of area game by hunters supplying whaling ships 1897–1910 and subsequent lack to mid-century, see Martel et al., 1984, *Wildlife of the Mackenzie Delta Region*.

5 AEP to OSF, 25 Jan 1927, PAC/CRP.

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CHAPTER EIGHT.
MAIL TIME IN AKLAVIK.

1 OSF to AEP, 27 June 1927, and AEP to OSF, 29 June 1927, PAC/CRP.


3 AEP to OSF, 25 June 1927, PAC/CRP.


7 MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 2 Dec 1927, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.

8 C. H. Ostenfeld to MOM, 3 Jan 1928, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
CHAPTER ELEVEN.
COMPLETING THE 1927 RECONNAISSANCE.

1 AEP to OSF, 15 Nov 1927. See also Presnall, 1943, Reindeer: Indian Service to War, for caution re: short study of arctic lichen ranges in comparison to slow lichen growth cycle; quotes Palmer’s new estimate 50–100 year recovery on badly over-grazed ranges and stresses need for ultra-conservative practices.

2 OSF to W. W. Cory, 14 Sept 1927; OSF to R. A. Gibson, 23 April 1928, PAC/CRP.

3 OSF to J. P. Richards, 30 Nov 1927; AEP to OSF, 1 Dec 1927, PAC/CRP.

4 See AEP, 1945, Mammals of Mackenzie Delta. Coyote killed on Arctic coast 1927 was new to the delta and unknown to Inuialuit although common at Arctic Red River and Fort Norman. Skin/skull in Nat. Mus.

5 AEP, 1938, Earth Mounds in Unglaciated Arctic Northwestern America. pp. 54–55, mentions visit to this pingo as noted in 1927 in his journal. His ‘Midway Island’ was Hendrickson Island. Fresh water in pingos much used by Inuvialuit.

CHAPTER TWELVE.
LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD.

1 AEP to MOM, 16 Jan 1928, PAC/NHC, RG 132:31:449.

2 AEP to MOM, 3 Feb 1928, PAC/NHC, RG 132:31:449.

3 MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 25 Jan 1928; C. H. Ostenfeld to MOM, 3 Jan 1928, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441. See also Grøtved, 1936, Vascular Plants: Fifth Thule Expedition, re: collectors Knud Rasmussen, Peter Freuchen, Therkel Mathiassen, Kaj Birket-Smith, Helge Bangsted and Jacob Olsen as having few field notes, lacking information, difficulty with plant collection/

preservation on Arctic expeditions, and only 1,600 specimens.


6 See Hedlin, 1961, Reindeer for the North; Inglis, 1969, And Then There Were None.

7 For readings on the Baffin Island experiment, see Diubaldo, 1978, Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic; Stefansson, 1964, Discovery; Jenness, 1964, Eskimo Administration; Scotter, 1969, Reindeer Husbandry as Land Use; and Richard S. Finnie, 16 June 1947, semi-final draft of reindeer article sent to AEP for editing, Porsild collection, ROM.

8 Rutherford et al., 1922, Report of the Royal Commission to investigate the possibilities of the reindeer and musk-ox industries in the arctic and sub-arctic regions of Canada.

9 OSF to AEP, 1 Feb 1928; AEP to OSF, 4 Feb 1928; OSF to AEP, 14 Feb 1928, PAC/CRP.

10 Hansard, 6 June 1928, pp. 4007–8.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.
WINTER TRAIL TO GREAT BEAR LAKE.


CHAPTER SIXTEEN.
OF ICE AND “FLIES” AND MISERABLE DOGS.

1 J. M. Bell, 1902, Topography/Geology Great Bear Lake.
2 AEP, 1929, Reindeer Grazing in Northwest Canada.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.
MCTAVISH ARM AND CONJUROR BAY.

1 AEP to George Douglas, 27 Oct 1953, NHF.
2 See H. Robertson, 1984, Gentleman Adventurer, re: Bonnycastle going north on Distributor and meeting RTP Fort Norman 1 July 1928; also reported 35 dead Fort Simpson, 23 Fort McPherson, 13 Aklavik, 7 Shingle Point, 1 Whitefish Station; toll of more than 300 Indians reported by Bishop Fleming.
5 J. M. Bell, 1902, Topography/Geology Great Bear Lake.
6 See F. Watt, 1980, Great Bear Remembered, for Labine/Dickens flight 1929, Eldorado strike/claims Echo Bay 1930 to Port Radium 1932. See also R. Finnie, 1942, Canada Moves North, for build-up activity/air exploration; and Miggs Wynne Morris, 2000, Return to the Drum, for effect of radiative exposure on the Sahtu’ine 1932–60.
7 See Johnson, 1975, Great Bear Lake in History, p. 239.
8 D. Jenness, 1932, The Indians of Canada.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.
END OF THE INVESTIGATION.

1 C. Osgood, 1931, Ethnography of the Great Bear Lake Indians.
2 See F. Watt, 1980, Great Bear Lake Remembered, and V. Stefansson, 1913, My Life with the Eskimo.
3 AEP to George Douglas, 27 Oct 1953, NHF.

CHAPTER NINETEEN.
RESULTS OF THE SURVEY.

1 RTP, Iris Warner Collection, 1973–74, MS:B247, Yukon Archives, Whitehorse. See also Davignon, 1988, The Cinnamon Mine, for story of courtship.
4 AEP to OSF, 31 Oct 1928, PAC/CRP.
5 AEP to OSF, 7 Jan 1929, PAC/CRP.
6 Purchase agreement with Lomen Reindeer Corp. 8 May 1929, LFP:48:692.
7 AEP to OSF, 7 Jan 1929, PAC/CRP.
8 Ibid.
9 AEP to OSF, 31 Oct 1928, PAC/CRP.
11 L. J. Palmer to AEP, 5 Feb 1929, PAC/CRP.
12 OSF to W. W. Cory, 18 Dec 1928, PAC/CRP.
13 Purchase agreement, 8 May 1929, LFP:48:692.

CHAPTER TWENTY.
"THE BEST LAID PLANS."

1 MOM to Watson, 13 May 1929, PAC/NHC, RG 132:35:497.
2 Wyatt Malcolm to MOM, 2 May 1929, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:433.
3 MOM to C. H. Ostenfeld, 13 May 1929 and 19 May 1929, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
4 C. H. Ostenfeld to MOM, 3 June 1929, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
6 AEP to R. A. Gibson, PAC/NHC, RG 132:32:461.
8 See Davignon, 1988, The Cinnamon Mine, for family background of Asta Koefoed Hansen.
10 MOM to Selim Birger, 5 Feb 1929, PAC/NHC, RG 132:19.
11 See AEP, 1936, The Reindeer Industry and the Canadian Eskimo, p. 12, and AEP typed copy of journal, June–July 1931, Introduction to Trip to Sweden and Norway to engage Laps for Reindeer Station, NHF; re: AEP attitude to drive organization.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.
SAD NEWS AND SUMMER IN SCANDINAVIA.

1 SGD. Carl Christensen to MOM, 19 Jan 1931, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
2 MOM to Mrs. Ostenfeld, 24 Feb 1931, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
4 MOM to Mrs. Ostenfeld, 14 June 1933, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:441.
5 MOM to OSF, 3 March 1931, PAC/NHC, RG 132:30:433.
6 See AEP, 1936, Reindeer Industry and the Canadian Eskimo.
8 L. D. Baldwin to OSF, 7 May 1931; L. D. Baldwin to Lomen Reindeer Corp, 6 June 1931, LFP:48:692.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.
DESTINATION REINDEER STATION.

1 With one exception cited below, the information in this chapter has been taken from the second part of Erling Porsild’s typed copy of his 1931 journal – To Sweden and Norwegian Lapland to engage Lap reindeer instructors for Reindeer Experiment, 15 pp. A. E. Porsild collection, ROM.

2 AEP to C. L. Porter, 2 May 1949, NHF, re ‘Sennegrass’ instructions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.
THE DRIVE CONTINUES.


2 OSF to L. D. Baldwin, 23 Oct 1931; see also H. E. Hume to L. D. Baldwin, 17 Dec 1931, re: retirement of OSF and work of NWT Branch transferred to Dominion Lands Administration. LFP:48:692.

3 OSF to L. D. Baldwin, 29 Nov/1 Dec 1931, LFP:48:692.

4 AEP to Commissioner, Dominion Lands Administration, 13 March 1932, PAC/CRP, RG 85:1135:270-1-1; personal communication with Elly Porsild in Whitehorse, 1985.


6 [R. Lomen] to C. J. Lomen, 31 Aug 1934, re: possible purchase of native deer; Circulated warning unsigned, undated, possibly written by Geo.

4 For history leading to investigation of Lomen enterprises, see Olsen, 1969, *Alaska Reindeer Herdsmen*.

5 C. J. Lomen to R. Lomen, 8 July 1933, LFP:48:692.


7 AEP, 1936, Reindeer Industry and the Canadian Eskimo.

8 A. Bahr to C. Lomen, 18 April 1934; D. E. Crowley to R. Lomen, 26/27 Feb 1934; R. Lomen to D. E. Crowley, 16 March 1934; LFP:48:692.


20 AEP, 1936, Reindeer Industry and the Canadian Eskimo.


CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.
THE NATIONAL HERBARIUM.


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1 All references in this chapter were taken directly from National Herbarium files, except for quotations from personal copies of Farley Mowat’s People of the Deer and The Desperate People, and Mowat’s perspective on the affair which is documented in his recent book, Eastern Passage, published by McClelland & Stewart in 2010.

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22. A. H. Lawrie to AEP, 13 July 1953; AEP to A. H. Lawrie, 17 July 1953; F. Mowat to AEP, 18 July 1953.


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CLOSING THE CIRCLE.

1 Bassett Maguire, 1958, “Boreal America,” in Fifty Years of Botany, by William Steere, p. 213.
SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The single most important document at the beginning of the research was given to me by Mr. Aksel Porsild, son of Robert Porsild, to whom and for which I am grateful beyond words. It was a typed copy of Erling Porsild’s daily record of his first work with the Department of the Interior, 1926–28: “Field Journal of an Expedition through Alaska, Yukon, and the Mackenzie District, being a botanical reconnaissance with special reference to the suitability of the country for domesticated reindeer. Also many notes on the physiography of the country, its inhabitants, wild life and general economic conditions. 146 pp.” This unpublished diary was nowhere found on file in any future searches, and I am more than grateful to the staff of the Boreal Institute library in Edmonton for putting me in touch with Mr. Porsild as well as to him for his generous and timely gift.

Other important and unpublished daily journals, as referred to in the text and endnotes, covered official journeys taken during Erling Porsild’s years at the National Herbarium. They were located in 1985 in the A. E. Porsild collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario. This assortment of miscellaneous papers, published and unpublished documents, and literature (personally annotated by Porsild) was collected and/or presented to him during his tenure as Botanist and Chief Botanist at the herbarium before being donated to the ROM after his death. Thankfully, I was able to examine the whole prior to dispersal into various other libraries as was expected. I would like to express my appreciation of the help received from ROM staff, who graciously photocopied material for me to take away with me while trustingly allowing me to go through the large unsorted pile of material without removing anything of value to a sorely tempted biographer and lover of books and botany.

Voluminous correspondence, reports, and miscellaneous papers connected with the Canadian Reindeer Project (Northern Affairs) were available from the Public Archives of Canada (RG85:1135:270-1-1). A trip to Fairbanks
revealed that the Alaskan Reindeer papers were to be found in the B. B. Mozee collection (M6 A4) and the Lomen Family Papers 1850–1969 (Box 48, Folder 692) at the Elmer E. Rasmussen Library, University of Alaska. The study visit to the northwest in the summer of 1985 was only made possible through a northern training grant from the Centre for Northern Studies at McGill University for which I would like to express my deep gratitude. I am also grateful to Mrs. Erika Mothersill in whose car we drove the Alaska Highway, and to Dr. R. White and Dr. D. Klein at the University of Fairbanks who made several helpful contributions and took me to see the deserted reindeer station at Cantwell.

While passing through Whitehorse, I was able to interview Mrs. Elly Porsild, who was charming and helpful about family aspects that I had found puzzling, and find copies of correspondence and other items related to Robert and Elly Porsild in the Yukon Archives including the Iris Warner collection of 1973–74. The northern training grant allowed me to continue to Inuvik and fly home via Yellowknife. I would like to thank the staff at the Inuvik Scientific Resource Centre for allowing me to stay in their facility and helping me to get down the Mackenzie River Delta to Reindeer Station and to the Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula by boat and small plane to look for pingos and reindeer, and the Northwest Territories Archives at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife for looking for information there, although I found little that was useful.

Back east, a primary source of inestimable value was that found in the official correspondence files located in the National Herbarium of Canada, and again I must thank McGill University for the Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l’Aide à la Recherche (Fonds FCAR Québec) scholarship that allowed me to finance the months of research in Ottawa. Thanks to the generous encouragement of Dr. Irwin (Ernie) Brodo, Chief Botanist at the National Herbarium, in 1985–86, I was given space to work in the herbarium and free access to the files kept by Porsild from 1936 to 1967, prior to their removal to outside archives where they would be less accessible. Again, everyone was wonderfully helpful in allowing me to photocopy everything I felt I needed, some of which would prove excessive as I learned more of my subject but I was not to know that at the time. I would like here to repeat my special thanks to Ernie for his ever-kind support and for his warm foreword which gives us such an immediate and intimate picture of Erling Porsild at home and in the Herbarium, and to his wife Fenja for her delightful company while we worked together on our separate projects in the basement of the National Herbarium.
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An additional vast collection of herbarium correspondence, reports, and documents was available from the Public Archives of Canada under National Herbarium correspondence, 1863–1963 (RG132, vols. 18–36), and I spent months and years in that superb institution, suffering a great deal of embarrassment at the time due to a clacking typewriter surrounded on all sides by silent new computers, and with a fistful of copy money in order to obtain larger sections of material that was needed. Personnel documents (RG32:686:Int.7) were at first considered too confidential to be released but were given to me eventually to be used with discretion. For many years, the External Affairs records were not available at the Public Archives for one reason or another. Sometime in the winters between 2005 and 2008, I was able to track them down in what had by then become known as the National Archives of Canada, filed under RG25, which gave me the background and history of the Canadian Consulate in Greenland during and immediately after World War II. I have nothing but praise for the extent and efficiency of this national treasure chest of important Canadian records and for the people who faithfully keep it running.

Since the time when I first worked on the files in the National Herbarium, the Canadian Museum of Nature has established an archival department and I suspect that the 1936–67 Porsild papers will be found there in future if not now. It was in these new archives, thanks to an introduction by George Argus, that I more recently discovered the letters between A. E. Porsild and R. M. Anderson, a rich source for the personal details and private opinions exchanged between them. I am very grateful to Chantal Dussault and Andrée Bisson for taking so much time and trouble to find and photocopy material from the Anderson collection for me to use.
Beyond the unpublished material found in various files, there is a wealth of data in published articles, reports, and reference books, some written by Porsild himself. Most of the material of this nature, listed under Selected Bibliography, either came from the National Herbarium as a gift, or were bought by me, or obtained on loan from the McGill University library system, or more locally by ordering them through the always helpful Grand Manan Library staff. I have also to thank Ava Sturgeon, Archivist at the Grand Manan Archives, for spending hours in searching for important information for me, Binx Remnant of Winnipeg provided a helpful contact, and Therese Etherington supplied a critical piece of the puzzle from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

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The records office at the University of Copenhagen kindly supplied the unusual conditions relating to Erling Porsild’s doctoral degree in 1956, and I have received other information by personal correspondence. In fact, over the long years this study has taken me, I have received clippings, articles, advice, information, books, and encouragement from too many people for me ever to
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Weber Müller-Wille (who generously took on the long and difficult task of doing the index) and Bill Weber went through my penultimate manuscript with a fine eye for every mistake that could be found, of whatever size or significance, and returned it to me with such assurance that it was an important and necessary document that I cannot begin to list the extent of their encouragement and assistance or thank them all enough for what they have done.

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Abbreviations:

AEP  Alf Erling Porsild
AINA  Arctic Institute of North America
IBC  International Botanical Congress
NHC  National Herbarium of Canada
NMC  National Museum of Canada
RTP  Robert Thorbjørn Porsild
MPP  Morten Pedersen Porsild

Two-letter abbreviations are used for U.S. states and Canadian provinces, e.g., “NT” = “Northwest Territories.”

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“Every era and field has its heroes. Dr. A. E. Porsild is one of them for Canadian Arctic Botany. Porsild is one of the unforgettable Canadian pioneers of science whose exciting life story, now fully revealed, will serve as a great example for younger generations of dedicated enthusiasts of all fields.”

Dr. Josef Svoboda, Professor Emeritus, Department of Biology, University of Toronto

One of Canada’s most remarkable botanists, Alf Erling Porsild (1901–1977) grew up on the Arctic Station in West Greenland, where he later served as Vice/Acting Canadian Consul (1940–43). For nearly twenty years, he studied reindeer activities in Alaska and the Northwest Territories as part of a Canadian project designed to encourage grazing animal husbandry among aboriginal peoples. As Curator of Botany at the National Museum of Canada, he collected thousands of specimens, greatly enlarging the National Herbarium and making it a superb research centre. Porsild’s meticulous work and observations have particular relevance today with the growing concern over global warming in the Arctic.

This long-awaited biography traces the challenging and adventurous career of an unusual, little-known scientist who battled rivalry, bureaucracy, personal disappointment, and private tragedy. In the end, he earned universal respect for his prodigious publications and intimate knowledge of the people, plants, and land around Canada’s Arctic Circle. His story gives the first full account of the Canadian Reindeer Project and Canada’s Consulate in wartime Greenland and describes the exploration and mapping of the Canadian flora and growth of the National Herbarium from about 1920 to Porsild’s retirement in 1967.

WENDY DATHAN studied botany at McGill University and eventually worked as Assistant/Acting Curator at the McGill Herbarium and thereafter began her research on Porsild for her master’s thesis on his Canadian Reindeer Project years. She is the author of two books on her travels and on her experiences living on Grand Manan, New Brunswick, where she is Curator of the Grand Manan Museum and an enthusiastic naturalist.