

Alf Erling Porsild

(1901-1977)

Alf Erling Porsild was born in Copenhagen on 17 January 1901. His father, Morten P. Porsild, an eminent botanist who made major contributions to knowledge of the flora of Greenland, was engaged at the time in establishing the Danish Biological Station in Godhavn on Disko Island, Greenland. The Porsild family moved there, and so Erling and his elder brother, Robert, grew up in an atmosphere redolent of Arctic botanical research. Erling later attended a boarding school in Denmark, but during adolescence he was plagued by poor health which eventually prevented his proceeding to more advanced education. After he returned to Greenland, his health greatly improved, and he soon became the active, robust person colleagues and friends knew.

From 1922 to 1925 he served as Assistant Botanist at the Biological Station in Godhavn. His brother Robert was in Greenland at the time also. Their own experiences in Greenland, and what they had learned from their father, taught them how little was known at the time about the plant life of Greenland and the North American Arctic. The brothers were engaged in planning a botanical expedition of their own on Baffin Island when they were suddenly invited by the Canadian government to undertake a survey of reindeer grazing potentials in northern Alaska and the Northwest Territories of Canada. The opportunity thus offered them exceeded by far what they had ever hoped for, and they at once accepted it. It was a major point of departure in their lives from which they were able to advance to everything they achieved thereafter.

Erling spent the next ten years on the reindeer study; his brother remained with him for approximately the first half of this period and then left to go into business.

The brothers went first to Alaska where they studied the reindeer herds and their grazing habits. Then they undertook long journeys in the north of the territory, including a winter trip with dogsleds around the coast from Nome and on to the mouth of the Mackenzie River. From there they made long trips, in both summer and winter, through the vast expanse that lies between Great Bear Lake and the Arctic Ocean, and between the Mackenzie and Coppermine rivers. Everywhere they went they not only made notes on grazing possibilities but also,

in season, collections of the flora. Though this "scouting" assignment was finished in 1930, Erling stayed with the reindeer project for another five busy years. He set up, manned, and arranged to supply, a reindeer research station on the east side of the Mackenzie Delta. The Eskimos, being a nomadic hunting people, showed no ability or interest in herding domesticated livestock, and Erling himself went to Lapland to engage suitable teachers for them.

Back in Ottawa in 1935 Erling Porsild immediately began to turn out a stream of publications based on his studies of the boreal American flora—a stream that continued to flow during the remainder of his life. In the following year he was appointed Acting Chief Botanist at the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa. He greatly enlarged the National Herbarium and made it a superb research tool. He travelled widely in all parts of boreal America, collecting and encouraging others to do the same. He also visited all of the great herbaria and botanical libraries of the world in which he might find specimens and records that would authenticate his own conceptions of species in the boreal American flora. When during the Second World War the Germans invaded Holland and Denmark, he volunteered for any service the Canadian government would give him. He was appointed Canadian Consul in Greenland in 1941 (he had been fluent in the Eskimo language since childhood) and served in that capacity until 1943. In 1946 he became Chief Botanist at the National Museum of Canada, a position which he held until he retired in 1967.

Erling Porsild 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. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1946), the Arctic Institute of North America (1946), the Swedish Phytogeographical Society, Uppsala (1958). Honorary fellowships were awarded to him by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1947), *Societas pro Fauna et Flora Fennica* (1948), *Societatis Zoologica-botanica*, Vanaamo (1948), the Finnish Academy of Science (1957) and the Norwegian Academy of Sciences (1964). Scholarships and awards also came to him from the American Philo-

sophical Society (1954) and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1957-1958). For civilian service during the Second World War he was received into membership of the Order of the British Empire in 1946. The Massey Medal was awarded him in 1966 for his contributions to Arctic botany and to Canadian science in general. In 1971 the Canadian Botanical Association awarded him its Lawson Medal, and that same year he received a Certificate of Merit from the Botanical Society of America. Honorary Doctorates of Science were conferred upon him by Acadia University, Nova Scotia, (1967) and Waterloo University, Ontario, (1973). He was active for many years in the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, and was a member of the New England Botanical Club. He was influential in the establishment of the "Arctic Circle", a group of persons with professional and amateur interests in the Canadian North.

For many years he regretted his lack of the academic stamp of approval he would have required had he been able to pursue formal graduate studies. He was therefore very happy when the University of Copenhagen, recognizing the significance of what he had done and was doing, informed him that if he would submit and personally defend a thesis, he would be awarded the academic degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This, one of his most treasured awards, he received in 1955.

Erling Porsild was a quiet man, shy and unassuming. Though public recognition and honours were heaped upon him, even those

who knew him most intimately rarely heard him speak of them. He had superb command of the English tongue, though it was not his own. This ability did not come from formal training in English, for he had little of that, but rather from wide and varied reading in English and American literature. In these he selected, unerringly, authors who were the great prose stylists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 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.

Erling Porsild died in Vienna on 13 November 1977. He is survived by his wife Margrit; a daughter, Mrs. Harry Lumsden of Aurora, Ontario; an adopted daughter, Mrs. Toni Kluth, who lives in England; and a sister, Tulle, and a brother, Sten, who both live in Denmark. His elder brother, Robert, died a few weeks later at his home in Whitehorse, Y.T. — on 30 December.

Hugh M. Raup