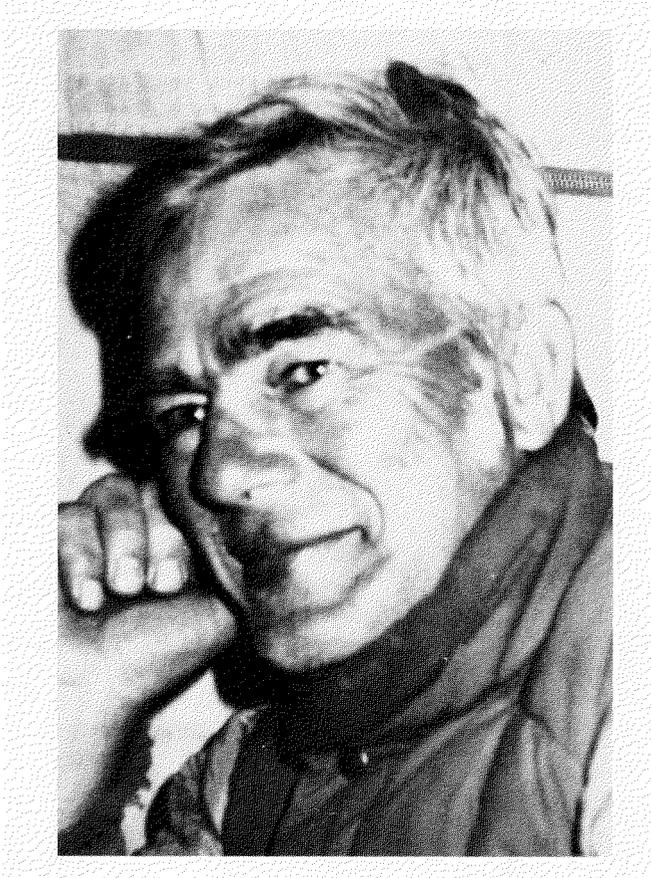


WILLIAM NATHANIEL IRVING  
(1927-1987)



William Nathaniel Irving died on November 25, 1987. He was an arctic archaeologist and professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto, internationally recognized as a leading scholar in arctic prehistory. His contributions were significant and appreciated during his lifetime. His initial research interests were in the Inuit cultures of northern Alaska and their antecedents, which led him to study both their ethnoarchaeology and the systematics and technology of stone implements, e.g., those of the arctic small tool tradition. His major research focus in the last two decades of his career was in searching in the northern Yukon for answers to a problem that puzzled anthropologists for over a century — when did humans enter the New World? Irving spent a good deal of time studying this topic while continuing to fulfill his university responsibilities as teacher, administrator and director of numerous graduate students.

William Irving was born in Toronto, Canada, on November 11, 1927. His family returned to the United States in 1937 and Irving completed his high school education in 1945. He entered the University of Alaska in 1948, and in 1952 completed a B.A. in anthropology, with minors in biology and geology. He did graduate work at Harvard University from 1953 to 1957 in anthropology and subsequently enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he received a Ph.D. in anthropology, with a minor in geology, in 1964. His doctoral thesis was on the arctic small tool tradition. During his graduate work in the 1950s and the early 1960s, Irving carried out field work in many locations, including Alaska and Keewatin, and several seasons on projects of the Smithsonian Institution (1957-59) at

the deeply stratified Medicine Crow site along the Missouri River in South Dakota and in Mayapan, Yucatan. His academic training, a mixture of anthropology and natural sciences, fitted him well for his subsequent directorship of the northern Yukon research program of the University of Toronto, where geoarchaeological, taphonomic and faunal considerations were included in archaeological questions to be solved.

In 1965, Irving took a position as archaeologist with the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. Between 1965 and 1969 he conducted archaeological reconnaissance, survey and excavations at sites in the Yukon. He taught, also, at Carleton University in Ottawa as a sessional professor. He subsequently took up a teaching position at the University of Toronto, remaining there from 1969 until his death nearly twenty years later.

His early publications dealt primarily with the archaeology of northern Alaska and Keewatin. He also published from his field work along the Missouri River and Mayapan, Yucatan. His first paper from the Yukon appeared in 1968, on the Old Crow region of the northern Yukon. This was followed over the next twenty years by a steady flow of publications on Pleistocene archaeology, geology, fauna and other aspects of this part of Beringia, many of which dealt with the general topic of peopling of the New World.

Irving's detailed involvement in the study of the early prehistory of the Old Crow basin of the northern Yukon began in 1966, when the late Peter Lord, a local Old Crow resident who was guiding paleontologist C.R. Harington on a fossil collecting expedition along the Old Crow River, recovered a whittled

caribou tibia bone found in association with Pleistocene fossils. Harington and Lord brought their specimens downriver to the Klokut site, where Irving was carrying out excavations. Irving became involved in the Old Crow River sites, and after further investigations in 1967 several mammoth bones and the caribou flesher were radiocarbon dated, using the apatite fraction. Dates of about 27 000 years were obtained, and this resulted in a flurry of scientific activity in the Old Crow region. Subsequently AMS radiocarbon dating of these specimens, using the collagen fraction, has resulted in dates in excess of 20 000 years on modified mammoth bone, but a late Holocene date on the caribou bone flesher.

Irving was at the forefront of this research, creating and directing the broadly based multidisciplinary northern Yukon research program based at the University of Toronto. He recognized the initial discoveries as reflecting a possible opportunity for locating early human sites in Beringia, perhaps one that would date the earliest immigrants into the New World. He understood the importance of unglaciated Beringia in permitting the movement of plant and animal species from Asia to the North American continent. Its influence on adaptations and subsequent filtering of those species into the central regions of the Americas was also recognized. Under Irving's direction, the northern Yukon research program focused not only on the Old Crow basin but also on Bluefish caves in the surrounding mountains. Most aspects of prehistoric human use of the region were investigated, from caribou fences to Pleistocene archaeology, as well as faunal, climatic, geological and vegetational history of unglaciated eastern Beringia. Numerous publications in many areas resulted from this research, with further aspects of this work continuing. Certain sites, including Bluefish caves, continue to provide important evidence on the peopling of the New World. Curvilinear breakage and reduction patterns of mammoth bone are similar to those on specimens recovered by Irving from Pleistocene deposits along the Old Crow River. Irving believed such patterns are the result of human activity and they are thus artifacts.

William Irving spent 17 consecutive field seasons in the Old Crow region. He was not only dedicated to his research, but had a particular fondness for the residents of the village of Old Crow. He involved them in the field research and always gave full credit to them for their assistance, discoveries and insights. He was often accompanied to Old Crow by his own family.

Irving's hope of locating an intact early man site in the Old Crow basin and the dream of finding archaic forms of *Homo sapiens* were never realized, but his enthusiasm and energy seldom lagged. Irving's advocacy for the recognition of certain breakage patterns and modifications of bones as human implements and his belief that humans may have occupied parts of Beringia as early as 150 000 years ago met with much criticism and skepticism. However, he forced peers and colleagues to think beyond accepted orthodoxies of education and urged them to reconsider accepted assumptions in defending the status quo. This debate over the years was very beneficial, driving scholars to more critically consider their assumptions and the nature of their evidence. It will be some time before the full impact of Irving's contributions can be fully evaluated, but there is no question but that he was a major participant and catalyst in northern research on the peopling of the New World.

One of Irving's greatest strengths was his ability to attract, inspire and direct graduate students. He was very level-headed and generous, and he directed student research without imposing his ideas or beliefs. He will be fondly remembered by his students and colleagues. He is survived by his wife, Lila, daughter, Rebecca, and sons, David and William.

*Patrick Julig  
William Hurley  
Department of Anthropology  
The University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M5S 1A1*