

NIELS OTTO CHRISTENSEN (1917–2003)

Niels Otto Christensen (“N.O.” to his friends) passed away on 19 September 2003 in Denmark, after a very full career there and in Greenland.

Following high school, N.O. commenced law studies in 1935, graduated from the University of Copenhagen in 1942, and practiced law until 1945. He then affiliated with the Greenland Office (Grønlands Styrelse) in the State Department. In 1947, he and his new bride, Birte Kold-Christensen, went to Godhavn (now Qeqertarsuaq) on Disko Island, Greenland, where N.O. served as *Landsfoged* (Local Governor) for North Greenland.

In Qeqertarsuaq, Birte and N.O. made many friends among the few Danish families and especially among the local Greenlanders, who quickly recognized their sincere affection for Greenland and its people, culture, and art. One of their many Greenlandic friends, former Director of Greenland Radio Jørgen Fleischer, states that N.O.’s contributions to Greenland and his love of its people will always be remembered.

In 1950, the position as *Landsfoged* was abolished because the North and South regional councils (*Landsråd*) were merged into one council, situated in Godthaab (Nuuk). N.O. accordingly moved to Nuuk as Director of the Office for the *Landshøvding* (Governor General). In 1955 and 1956, he served as acting *Landshøvding*.

In 1951 in Nuuk, the Christensen family met Trevor Lloyd, a professor of geography at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, who had served as Canadian consul in Greenland during World War II. Professor Lloyd, an advocate of increased contact between Arctic Canada and Greenland, organized an invitation for N.O. to spend half a year visiting North America. Initially he would go with Mrs. Christensen to Goose Bay (Labrador), Montreal, and Ottawa; then N.O. would separately visit Dartmouth College and spend several months visiting Inuit settlements throughout Arctic Canada.

At home in Greenland in 1955, the family housed Donn Haglund, a young American geographer. Donn was writing his dissertation on the economic geography of the Nuuk District at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he is currently professor emeritus. This stay was the beginning of a lifelong friendship between the Governor and a former Chairman of the Board of Governors at the Arctic Institute of North America.

From 1957 to 1962, N.O. and Birte lived in Skodsborg, Denmark, while he served as head of office in the Ministry for Greenland. During 1958–62, he was also a member of the Greenland Law Committee (*Grønlands Lovudvalg*). In 1962 they returned to Nuuk, where N.O. became the Governor General (*Landshøvding*), the highest-ranking Danish State official in Greenland. N.O. held this position until 1972 when he reached 55, the mandatory retirement age for all civil service employees in Greenland. Accordingly, the Christensens promptly returned to their family home in Skodsborg (suburban Copenhagen).



Niels Otto Christensen between old Greenlandic friends. Photographer unknown.

As the highest-ranking resident official in Greenland, N.O. was a member of the Board of Greenland Air (1963–67); chairman for several years of the Greenlandic Education Committee and the Greenlandic Radio Broadcasting Board; and a member of the Maritime and Air Rescue Council (1960–62). As Governor he was also ex-officio Chairman of the Greenland Parliament (*Landsråd*), but he worked to change the law so that an elected member of the Parliament could take over the chair. This came to pass in 1967.

In 1965, after an official diplomatic invitation, N.O. and Birte visited the United States for six weeks. They flew from Greenland to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington. After brief stays in Washington and New York, they went west to Colorado, where they visited several Indian reservations and even joined an Indian council meeting. After stops in Arizona and California, N.O. continued to Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska and visited Eskimo settlements from Nome to Barrow before returning to Greenland.

During N.O.’s many years in Greenland, his skills and empathy were widely utilized by local communities, who relied on his knowledge and his helpfulness. He served as a member of the Greenlandic Church Council (1962–72) and the Greenlandic Children’s Society (1960–85) and as Chairman of the Board of the Greenlandic National Museum (1967–71).

N.O. had his own sailboat during his stay at Qeqertarsuaq and enjoyed sailing in Disko Bay. At Nuuk he also had a small motorboat and enjoyed access to the government yacht. His interest in sports activities led to service as a patron of Greenland’s Athletic League (*Grønlands Idrætsforbund*). Back home in Skodsborg, he continued to enjoy sailing in Danish waters and was an active chairman of the local yacht club. After his official retirement in

1972, the Danish Government continued to draw on his expertise and capability. He was engaged in duties for the Danish Ministry for Industry and was chairman from 1979 to 1986 of the board for the Travel Insurance Foundation (*Rejsegarantifonden*).

N.O. was cited by the King as a Knight of the Order of Dannebrog in 1963 and by the present Queen as a Commander of the Order of Dannebrog in 1975. In 1987 he was awarded the Badge of Honour of the Order of Dannebrog. The Queen designated N.O. her Chamberlain in 1981. N.O. and Birte were attached to the Canadian Governor General during his visit to Denmark in June 1981, during which they established temporary residence at Fredensborg Castle. From 1977 to 1988, N.O. was a member of the board of the Royal Greenland Foundation, and during 1984–87 he was Treasurer of the Royal Orders of Chivalry for the Queen. In 2001, N.O. was awarded the Queen Ingrid Memorial Medal. N.O. and Birte were known for their hospitality: they frequently welcomed both private and official guests to their beautiful home.

During his tenure (1976–87) as director of the Danish Arctic Institute, N.O. organized several evening courses about Greenland and its nature, history, culture, and art (where Birte, especially, had a great knowledge). He had the ability to connect the right people with personal experiences from active life in Greenland to the Arctic Institute. Additionally he was internationally engaged during

1975–88 as a member of the Board of the Danish Canadian Society. For many years, he was an honorary member and Corresponding Governor of the Arctic Institute of North America.

As a member of Comité Arctique International (CAI), he participated in several of CAI's conferences, including the landmark meeting "The History of the Discovery of the Arctic Regions" held at the Vatican Library in Rome. (The conference proceedings volume, *Unveiling the Arctic*, was published by the Arctic Institute of North America in 1984.) During 1981–88 he was a member of the advisory board of the Danish Royal Geographic Society.

The Danish and international Arctic communities constantly benefited from the work and talents of N.O. Christensen, and in turn he received many expressions of honour and thanks. Additionally he was a beloved husband and father who enjoyed having his devoted wife Birte share with him both many journeys and their home in Skodsborg, where treasured memories remain of his active life in Greenland and the world.

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