

S. BRIAN McCANN (1935–2004)

Brian McCann, Arctic and coastal geomorphologist and former Chair of the Department of Geography at McMaster University, died on January 30th, 2004. He is survived by his wife, Louise, and their two children, son Callum and daughter Bronwen.

Brian was born in Manchester, England, in 1935. He took two B.Sc. degrees at the University of Wales, one in Geography in 1956 and a second in Geology in 1957. These were followed in 1961 by a Ph.D. in Geomorphology at the University of Cambridge, with a thesis entitled “The raised beaches of Western Scotland.” From 1960 to 1967, Brian was a lecturer in geomorphology at the Department of Geography, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. During this period he supervised two theses and published a series of eight papers in British journals on his research in Scotland and Wales.

In 1967, Brian emigrated to Canada to join the faculty in the Department of Geography at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. At McMaster, a Ph.D. program in Geography had been established in 1964, and on arrival Brian became part of a group of physical geographers examining Arctic coasts under the leadership of Frank Hannell. In fact, he flew north to Resolute within a few days of arriving in Hamilton in early June 1967. Fieldwork in that year was on Cornwallis Island, but Brian worked mainly from the base that was established in 1968 at Radstock Bay, near the southwest corner of Devon Island. Support for this research endeavour (which lasted until 1972) was provided by the Earth Sciences Section of the Defence Research Establishment Ottawa, as well as by the National Research Council.

Brian’s innovative studies on Devon Island focused primarily on the raised beaches, aspects of modern beach morphology, and the processes operating along Arctic coasts. In addition to studying the beach sediments, the McMaster group investigated the effects of sea ice on the beach environment. Master’s theses by Ed Owen, Bob Carlisle, and Bob Taylor resulted, as well as several journal articles, some with Brian as sole author and others written in conjunction with his students. The work at Radstock Bay culminated in August 1972, when a small camp was set up to accommodate an excursion of the 22nd International Geographical Congress in Montreal, and this occasion gave Brian a chance to demonstrate the McMaster group’s research to an international audience.

On his early visits to the Arctic, Brian realized that the role of running water in landscape evolution was much greater than had initially been supposed. Together with Graham Cogley, another of the many students he trained, and his colleague Phil Howarth, he carried out hydrological investigations on the Mecham River at Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island and at Jason’s Creek, a small stream that debouches into Radstock Bay on Devon Island. This research also led to several articles in scientific journals and books. Throughout his career, Brian did an excellent job of



S. Brian McCann by Ming-ko Woo.

getting his research, and that of his 24 graduate students, into print.

In 1972, the McMaster Arctic group shifted its field of interest to the head of Vendom Fiord, in the southern part of west-central Ellesmere Island. Following a reconnaissance in that year by Graham Cogley and Bill James, Brian spent the field seasons of 1973 to 1975 with his new colleague Ming-ko Woo carrying out hydrological investigations, including studies of an ice-dammed lake along the west side of the Prince of Wales Icefield. This research program led to master’s theses by Colin Ballantyne, Sue Blachut, and Raoul Miller, and a doctoral dissertation by Graham Cogley. With regard to Brian’s otherwise excellent abilities in the field, he is reported to have been less than satisfactory as the “stopwatch man” standing on the riverbank while his co-worker was in the river reading the current meter. Apparently Brian tended to walk up and down, forgetting the time, and he was known to walk right away from the site at times, completely forgetting what he was supposed to be doing, so deeply was he engrossed in tackling, no doubt, some other geomorphological problem of great import!

In 1974 Brian also spent time at Cunningham Inlet, Somerset Island, studying coastal processes with a Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) field party led by Bob Taylor. In 1977, Brian initiated research into the tidal flats of southern Baffin Island, a region of spectacularly high tides. With Gerry Reinson of the GSC he photographed the coastline of this region, and he continued fieldwork in 1979 and 1980, supported by Imperial Oil University Research Grants. In 1980 and 1981, Janis Dale undertook the fieldwork for her master’s thesis on the zonation of subarctic tidal flats at Frobisher Bay, and in 1980 she and Brian used state-of-the-art video recorders from a helicopter to document sea-ice breakup. This research led to two co-authored papers. The first (with Peter Hale as third author) treated the movement of boulders on tidal flats by sea ice, while the second dealt with sea-ice breakup and tidal flat processes.

For the 1981 and 1988 field seasons, Brian joined Wes Blake at the North Water Project's base camp (inherited by the GSC from the late Fritz Müller, McGill University and ETH–Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zürich) at Cape Herschel, east-central Ellesmere Island. Brian investigated the coastal characteristics of this vast region, focusing especially on the area around Cape Herschel as well as Alexandra Fiord. He was a most congenial and knowledgeable companion in the field, as well as being an excellent cook!

However, Brian's interests were not restricted to the Arctic, and other graduate students that he supervised studied geomorphological processes and Quaternary history in many different regions of Canada, including British Columbia, Alberta, southern Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes.

Brian rose steadily in the Department of Geography at McMaster, being appointed Professor in 1973. Between 1976 and 1978 he was on a leave of absence as a Research Scientist at the Atlantic Geoscience Centre (AGC) of the Geological Survey of Canada, Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. His earlier coastal research, as well as work carried out while he was at AGC (now called GSC Atlantic), culminated in May 1978 when, under the sponsorship of the Geological Survey of Canada, he convened a conference at Halifax on "The Coastline of Canada – Its Littoral Processes and Shore Morphology." Brian edited the resulting 439-page volume, containing 29 articles, which was published in 1980 as GSC Paper 80-10, "The Coastline of Canada," the first-ever review of Canada's coasts. He took up his professorship again in 1978, and he served as Chair from 1985 to 1991 and then as Acting Chair in 1994–95.

In addition to his teaching and field research, Brian was an associate editor of the *Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences* (1981–90) and a member of the editorial board of *Applied Geography* (1980–95), and he served as Review Editor of the *Journal of Coastal Research* (1989–91). As well as editing the large volume on Canada's coasts, mentioned earlier, he contributed chapters to 10 other books between 1968 and 1987, and he provided annual reviews on "Coastal Landforms" for the journal *Progress in Physical Geography* from 1977 through 1982.

Brian was a member of the Advisory Committee on Arctic Land Use Research of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1980–85), a member of the Canadian Geoscience Council's Advisory Committee on Quaternary and Engineering Geology (1984–85), organizer of the Canadian Association of Geographers Annual Meeting (Hamilton, 1987), co-organizer of the Third International Conference on Geomorphology (McMaster University, Hamilton, 1993, for the International Association of Geomorphologists), and a member of the Committee for the Professional Registration of Geoscientists in Ontario (1992–95).

Brian was a dedicated teacher. He often encouraged his colleagues to update courses and to devote special efforts to undergraduate instruction. His greatest passion was fieldwork. As Chair of Geography, he injected new activities into the field program. Taking the lead himself, he took large groups of first-year physical geography students on short field trips in the Dundas Valley, and often in September he led a field course to Cape Cod in Massachusetts. As an instructor, he encouraged students to observe, measure, record in words and sketches, and interpret the natural and human phenomena in the field. Field training of the next generation of students is certainly one of Brian's major legacies, and today his former students are professors in their own right at several universities, hold government research positions, and are well-known consultants. In the words of Graham Cogley, "He was the best supervisor any student could possibly have had, in addition to being an ideal field companion and a very sane and lovable man."

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