

ARNOLD JAMES (MOOSE) KERR (1921–2008)

Arnold James (Moose) Kerr died suddenly on 17 September 2008, in Ottawa, shortly after lunching with old colleagues from his days at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. He was 87.

Those of us who knew Moose when he was Chief of the Northern Science Research Group will long remember his calm yet engaged manner. He would spend many hours talking with his staff, sharing experience and ideas. He had a unique ability to bring out the best in everyone around him. Sitting back in an office chair, often with two cigarettes burning at the same time (the result of an engagement with conversation that caused everything else to fade into the background), he managed to bring out much of what was best about the North and most productive in government-led research. Moose built up a stable of researchers to whom he gave inspiration, support, and the most gentle but valuable kind of direction. In this way he had an extraordinary and invaluable place in the history of Canadian social science.

Moose was born in Edmonton and spent his early years in the Peace River country, where his father was a minister in the Anglican Church. The family later moved to Ontario, where Moose worked summers in northern lumber camps while attending the University of Toronto. His experience in the bush made a profound impression on him: for the rest of his life, he would delight in canoes, timber, bush camps, and self-sufficiency. The bush experience also promoted his interest in anthropology and the indigenous peoples of northern Canada.

He put aside those interests in 1942, however, to enlist in the RCAF. Before embarking for Britain, Moose married Eleanor Robinson; she had recently returned from Japan, where her parents had lived and worked as Anglican missionaries. Shortly before his twin daughters were born, Moose was posted to Bomber Command's 128 Squadron, and he flew over 30 operations as a Mosquito navigator before the war's end. He did not speak often or easily about his wartime experiences. When he did, he made no secret of the terror of some of these operations. Nor did he conceal his discomfort, as a Canadian serviceman, with the conventions and attitudes he encountered in the culture of Britain's RAF. He had always been antipathetic to hierarchy and inequality, and he found himself at times sharply antagonistic to the way the lower ranks were expected to accept the conceits of the upper. He refused a commission upon graduation and later remarked that he was perfectly happy to have ended the war with the same rank at which he had started it.

Moose completed his undergraduate degree on his return to Canada and then enrolled in a master's program in anthropology at the University of Toronto. Seeking to do fieldwork that would take him into the bush, he took his young family in 1947 to live at Rupert's House on James Bay, where he carried out research on Cree food habits for his thesis. He wanted to do further research in social anthropology in the Northwest Territories, but found no



Moose Kerr at Rupert's House, Quebec, in 1948.

appropriate employment opportunities. Needing to support his family, and hearing that teachers were needed, Moose earned a teaching certificate and found a job at the new federal day school in Aklavik. Being the only male teacher there, he was shortly named principal. He and his family lived in Aklavik for 12 years.

The new school at Aklavik was part of a fundamental change in the Canadian North after the war, when the federal day schools began supplanting the residential school system run by religious orders. At the same time, the administration of public services was taken over from the RCMP by northern service officers. Moose, with his awareness of anthropology and strong beliefs in the need for social justice, was an ideal person to represent this shift from religious to secular education. His passion for the outdoors (he once recalled that for a two-year period, he had worn no footwear but gum boots or moccasins), along with the ability he and Ellie had to settle well and deeply into a small, mixed community, meant that the Kerr family's years in the North were to be fruitful and happy.

The new, secular education system for aboriginal children was introduced in the Mackenzie Delta. There Moose found a polyglot community of Inuvialuit and Gwich'in fur trappers. Some were the descendents of, or married to,

men from all around the world—Scandinavians, Germans, Americans, Hawaiians, and Scots—who had come to the western Arctic as whalers, traders, or escapees from mainstream life. Many in the Aklavik community had traveled widely through northwestern North America. They were tough, hardworking, independent people who knew how to enjoy life—Moose’s type of people.

Moose greatly admired the people of Aklavik and respected their way of life, their languages, and especially the knowledge and stories of the old-timers. He also valued the informality, warmth, and egalitarianism, and the absence of bureaucracy and hierarchy that typified the community in those years. So when the Northern Administration decided in the mid-1950s to introduce the Delta to modernity by moving the town of Aklavik to a new site on firm ground on the east side of the Delta, he readily engaged in the “resistance movement” and became its non-aboriginal leader. Moose counseled: “Never Say Die.” That is still the motto of the Moose Kerr Aklavik School, so named in his honour in 1969. These were, by his own account, the best years of his life. He maintained contact with the school long after he left, and he held on to the memory of those rich, intense times in the North when both the place and his role in that place made every kind of sense to him. He is remembered for his innovative approach to education, which incorporated local knowledge, culture, and language.

Yet the great contribution Moose made to the understanding of the Canadian North came with his move to Ottawa to head what would become the Northern Science Research Group (NSRG) in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The Research Group’s mandate was to assist in the development of the Canadian North by collecting and disseminating technical and scientific information, to sponsor research on northern subjects, to encourage northern research by non-governmental agencies, and to coordinate the government’s northern research. Because this mandate precluded research already assigned to other agencies (such as the Canadian Wildlife Service and the National Museum), the Research Group’s central focus became social anthropology.

Moose’s tenure coincided with the launching of new and ambitious programs of work for the NSRG. These included the Mackenzie Delta Research Project; the hiring of full-time research scientists; the development of an ongoing circumpolar research and exchange program, with particular focus on the Soviet Union; and the administration of the Northern Scientific Training Grants and the Inuvik (and later Igloodik) Research Laboratory.

The Mackenzie Delta Research Project (1965–67) was an interdisciplinary effort that brought together researchers from the fields of social anthropology, economic geography, sociology, psychology, and engineering to examine the problems of a region undergoing rapid economic and social change. The project marked a shift from individual academic studies of isolated indigenous groups to the interdisciplinary study of the impact of social and economic change on contemporary northern communities. The only



Moose and Eleanor Kerr with some of their girls in Aklavik, Northwest Territories, in 1954.

parallels in Canada at that time were the McGill/Laval Cree Developmental Change Project and Memorial University’s Institute of Social and Economic Research program on the study of coastal communities in Labrador and Newfoundland. Moose promoted the exchange of ideas and results among these three programs.

At the same time, Moose oversaw the expansion of both the NSRG’s permanent research staff and its contracted research. With the enthusiastic support of his colleague and ally Graham Rowley, then Scientific Adviser to the Minister, Moose nurtured intellectual curiosity, commitment to intensive, on-the-ground field research, and a collegial atmosphere that was more attuned to the best kind of university senior common room than to the normal dictates and habits of the bureaucracy.

The NSRG’s research program was inspired by the ideals of community development and improvement of social and economic conditions, but it was also hypothesis-driven and focused on the immediate needs of northern people and government administration.

Public policy needs drove the research program, with the expectation that social research would inform public policy. The NSRG constituted a fundamental modernization of the relation between research and public policy in the Canadian North, replacing the previous system in which policies were recommended by a group of “old northern hands” who thought they knew from their own practical experience what would be good for the North. Moose guided this transition with conviction, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and respect, and was thus able to coordinate and encourage a remarkable florescence of Arctic social science during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Moose and his team shared a faith (more common then than now) in the possibility, and indeed the obligation, for government to implement honourable and equitable development in the Arctic. A much-repeated judgement of

previous failures in Canada's obligation towards the peoples of the North echoed the voices of explorers turned policy makers like Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Diamond Jenness. It was that the great mistakes in the North came from absence of government, which was to imply that the application of government—at least good, thoughtful government—would make things better. This result depended on policy that was informed, if not generated, by high-quality research.

Moose gathered a group of young researchers around him, encouraged their work, sent them into the field, encouraged them to stay there as long as possible, made sure they had opportunities for professional development, sent them to conferences, urged them to write more than mere reports, and shielded them as far as he could from bureaucratic tedium and interference. Yet he brought with him a healthy skepticism about the benefits that modernity would bring to the North. He had little faith in the benefits of new towns, industrial employment, or southern aspirations for most northern peoples. He also brought an outsider perspective on the Ottawa bureaucracy, having been on the receiving end of it for a decade, additionally inspired by an ingrained dislike of hierarchy.

But in the end, the underlying tension between the optimistic views that had shaped the NSRG and the exigencies of a northern development policy that was based on large-scale resource development could not be contained. More than one NSRG report called those policies into question. Moose could see all too well that the NSRG, as he had shaped it, was doomed. But the work that he had supported was in place, and much of it managed to continue, though more within university departments and far less within the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Memorial University of Newfoundland awarded Moose an honorary degree in 1978, in recognition of his achievements as a teacher and community worker in the North, his mentoring and guidance of both young Northerners and aspiring northern social scientists, and his ability to bridge academic and government circles.

When Moose retired, an era came to an end. He was too thoughtful, as well as appropriately skeptical, to have held on to many high hopes. Like others at the time, he looked to indigenous organizations—the Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and the Dene Nation—to conceive and press for a sane form of northern development (though the term “development” often brought a wry smile to his face). Moose did not publish extensively in the northern social science literature. His legacy is, instead, his inspiration, encouragement, and mentorship to many who devoted their lives and careers to the understanding and betterment of Canada's North.

Moose and Ellie left Ottawa and moved to a home that they had designed and built for themselves in Lanark County. There Moose achieved some of the self-reliance, subsistence living, and cheerful independence that he had always valued above just about everything else. His large and vibrant family visited often, as did his friends. And he had his books.

For much of his life, Moose was engaged with questions of education—as a student, teacher, principal, and ultimately a leader and mentor. He was an instinctive radical, quick to see and oppose parochialism and elitism of any kind and keen to find new ways of thinking about both the history and the possibilities of educational systems. As he grew older and ever more exposed to the difficulties that obstructed the kinds of vision and change he was drawn toward, he sustained his radical critique. Informed as they came to be by a certain cynicism, inevitable perhaps for anyone so deep within the day-to-day realities of public service, Moose's ideals never yielded. To the last days of his life, he was reading, thinking and, whenever opportunity arose, urging the causes of human rights and social justice. A man of socialist convictions and anarchist inclinations, Moose also had a conservative streak, a deep respect for the old ways, reflected for example, in the reverence for wood he brought to his workshop at home. All of these tendencies gave rise to his profound doubts about the status quo and his concern to reconceive the very foundations of the social and economic system he lived within. In these ways, Moose's was a lively and original mind; he was always a delight to sit and talk with. None who knew him well will forget his long and detailed recollections of people and times he had known during his days in the Arctic, told with a great sense of pleasure and without a trace of malice. Moose had known considerable professional adversity and disappointment, but was too philosophical and generous to hold grudges.

Everyone who worked in the North knew Moose Kerr. And everyone who knew him was warmed by his gentle and considerate personality, moved by his remarkable modesty, impressed by the depth of his understanding of the Arctic, and delighted by his reflections on the human condition. He was a man who always looked out for others: he always wished to help, as well as to understand. An extraordinarily large number of people owe him the deepest of thanks—while he never sought any such thing. He was admired for who he was and what he achieved. His contributions to Canadian scholarship and administration, as well as to education in Aklavik and beyond, were immense.

He is survived by his wife Eleanor, his five daughters—Karen, Sharon, Mia, Mora, and Peggy—and their families, and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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