

GEOFFREY HATTERSLEY-SMITH (1923–2012)

“There seems nothing in my background,” wrote Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith at the start of his unpublished memoirs, “to suggest a future interest in the polar regions.” Nevertheless, Geoffrey—who died on July 21, 2012 at the age of 89—became one of the giants of Canadian Arctic science. The High Arctic’s first glaciologist, he led scientific expeditions every year from 1953 to 1972. He was the first to study the ice shelves of Ellesmere Island. He did pioneering work in Antarctica and wrote three books on place-names in the polar regions. Finally, he was a passionate mountaineer and amateur historian who in the course of his glaciology duties, always kept his well-read eyes open for historic cairns and camps. Though he had little patience for modern self-styled “explorers,” believing that “exploration was already a joke when I came to Canada in 1951,” he traveled in traditional style by dog team for months at a time during his research.

Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith was born in London on April 22, 1923. His father, a soldier and avid sportsman, was posted to Hong Kong a few months later. The family returned to London when Geoffrey was three. In 1928, they moved to a sprawling residence on 10 acres of land in Sissinghurst, in the county of Kent, which is still the family home. The neighborhood bristled with Old World charm and celebrity: parts of the house dated back to the 1530s, and nearby stood a castle and two of the oldest yew trees in Britain. Travel writer Charles Doughty lived across the road, and periodically T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) toodled past on his motorcycle to visit his fellow author.

Like most young gentlemen of the era, Geoffrey was sent off early to boarding school and later won a scholarship to Winchester, a traditional boys’ school whose 14th century motto was, “Manners makyth man.” His mother died of pneumonia in 1937, shortly before Geoffrey began Winchester.

At Winchester, Geoffrey absorbed some of those old-school manners that made living in a tent with him so easy. Like his father, he loved sports and he credited racquets—a form of squash—with later helping him quickly learn how to crack a whip over the sled dogs’ heads in the Arctic. He also discovered that he didn’t like Latin and Greek, so he switched to science.

In his last year at Winchester, the future mountaineer took up roof-climbing, which was a common precursor to rock climbing in that era. George Mallory of Everest fame also indulged in this hazardous pursuit at Winchester. It involved scrambling up college buildings using drainpipes, mouldings, and other makeshift hand- and footholds. Young Geoffrey also took to long bike rides and country walks—activities more suited to a future contemplative Arctic personality than to a thrill-seeker.

By the time he began Oxford University in 1941, Geoffrey was convinced that he was going to become a forester. He spent three summers working in the nearby woods with local woodsmen. “These were some of the happiest days I



Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith at Lake Hazen in May 1958. (Photo: Library and Archives Canada/ James Patrick Croal fonds/R5272-0-0-E.)

can remember,” he recalled. “Hard physical work with studies gone to the winds.”

An enthusiastic tutor who specialized in northern plants awakened Geoffrey’s interest in the Arctic. Then World War II interrupted his studies, and he joined the Royal Navy early in 1943, at age 19. He served in a gunboat—it bothered him when others spoke incorrectly of serving “on” a ship—and was off the beaches of Normandy during D-Day. Later, he moved to a destroyer, protecting convoys to Murmansk—his first glimpse of northern latitudes. Several times, he cut short his own leave to volunteer for further assignments, while characteristically professing that others were “much braver” than he.

After the war, he decided to abandon forestry for geology. “Perhaps,” he speculated later, “I was influenced by my rock-climbing in England and Wales and my first season in the Alps.” By 1946, he was a serious rock climber, and he spent the summers of 1946 and 1947 climbing in Switzerland. He also assisted glaciologist Gerald Seligman and crystallographer Max Perutz, who were studying the transformation of snow into glacier ice near Grindelwald, until he broke his ankle in a skiing accident.

Geoffrey left for Antarctica in October 1947 as part of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. He dogsledged for 10 weeks around heavily glaciated King George Island, living on tinned food, seal meat, and pemmican. He climbed several peaks, officially for survey purposes, making the first ascent of 1300-foot Ternyck Needle. The weather in this region was so poor that he could travel, on average, only one day in six. He joked about the boredom of lying tent-bound for days, where journal entries amounted to, “Didn’t finish yesterday’s candle till today. Cleaned teeth,” and where he and his tent mates fantasized

about calling a taxi to rescue them. “If one didn’t come, fine,” Geoffrey said about those stir-crazy days, “but if you started believing that one did come, by God, you were in trouble.”

He served as base camp leader on King George Island during the winter of 1948–49 and first practiced his belief that an isolated science party best avoided conflict through tolerance, tact, and a sense of humor. “It seemed ridiculous to give orders,” he said. “One listened to suggestions and then agreed what should be done.” It was little wonder that he remained lifelong friends with so many of his colleagues. His downhill skiing remained less elegant than his leadership, and before leaving Antarctica, he broke his ankle a second time.

Geoffrey spent several months in the Falkland Islands in 1949–50, observing the local truism that the year here “can be divided into eight months’ winter and four months’ bad weather.” Although his sojourn reads in some ways as a social interlude, with teas and horseback riding and even a fancy dress ball, he later published a treatise on the history of place-names in the Falkland Dependencies.

In 1951, Geoffrey completed his Master’s Degree at Oxford and came to Canada. “I had a strong hankering to go to the Arctic,” he admitted, and thanks to Colin Bertram, Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, and Graham Rowley, head of the Arctic Section of the Defence Research Board, he was given his chance. It was an ideal time for outdoor-oriented researchers such as Geoffrey. Arctic science was on the cusp of past and present: Researchers went north by aircraft but traveled as the explorers had, by skis, dog teams, and backpacking. Furthermore, Canada was in one of its periodic funks about Arctic sovereignty and needed to address both the Cold War threat of Soviet submarines in Canadian waters and the more subtle issue of the Americans, who had extended their influence in Arctic Canada during the war and post-war years.

Now firmly a glaciologist, Geoffrey as his first task assisted the Arctic Institute of North America’s Project Snow Cornice by measuring the snow accumulation on the Yukon’s Upper Seward Glacier. Later that summer, he joined an oceanographic mission into the Beaufort Sea. On ship he got to know Tom Manning, who became a close friend and whom Geoffrey considered the “last of the true Arctic explorers.” Their team discovered a deep submarine channel leading from the Arctic coast into the Beaufort Sea east of Herschel Island. Classified secret at the time, the channel was used in 1958 by the USS nuclear submarine *Skate* to reach the North Pole. Geoffrey also became the first geologist to visit Banks Island.

In 1952, Geoffrey supervised a top-secret project to install a nuclear-test detector on Cornwallis Island. Geoffrey’s father, interviewed beforehand by the RCMP about his son’s loyalties, testily replied, “Look here, my father played cricket for Gloucestershire,” which seemed to settle the matter.

Later that summer, Geoffrey took a mountaineering holiday in the Canadian Rockies and nearly died on a climb

near Mt. Assiniboine when a companion slipped and pulled his two roped partners off the mountain. Geoffrey lost his ice ax but managed to break their slide down a snow couloir before all three went off a cliff. This was “the closest call I ever had,” he said later.

The Defence Research Board was set up in 1947 as the civilian science branch of the Canadian Armed Forces, and Geoffrey found a permanent home in its Arctic Section. He toiled alongside Keith Greenaway and Moira Dunbar, future authors of the fine book, *Arctic Canada from the Air* (1965), and reported first to Graham Rowley, another legendary Arctic figure, and later to Trevor Harwood.

In 1953, Geoffrey first visited northern Ellesmere Island, “which was to become my obsession for the rest of my time in Canada.” Indeed, 1953 and 1954 might be considered the highlight years of his career. He was doing original work on the ice shelves of northern Ellesmere, he was out on the land for months at a time, and he even had the chance to indulge his growing passion for Arctic history.

Ice islands had recently been discovered floating in the Arctic Ocean. Because they were long-term stable platforms, unlike the sea ice itself, these islands had strategic value. They were found to originate from Ellesmere’s ice shelves, and in April 1953, Geoffrey and Robert Blackader of the Geological Survey of Canada flew to Alert to study them and to reconnoiter the geology of the north coast.

At the time, only four other parties had traveled any part of the north coast: Pelham Aldrich of the 1875–76 British Arctic Expedition; the North Pole-obsessed American Robert Peary; the German Hans Krüger, who vanished on his journey in 1930; and Godfred Hansen, who dogsledded from Northwest Greenland in 1920 to leave emergency supplies for Roald Amundsen, when the great Norwegian made an abortive attempt to sail his ship, *Maud*, across the Arctic Ocean.

In the company of two Greenland Inughuit and their dogs, Geoffrey and Blackader dogsledded west from Alert. En route, they visited explorers’ cairns and caches. Geoffrey retrieved Aldrich’s note from Crozier Island, visited the Peary signpost at Cape Columbia, and purloined two cans of Christmas pudding from Godfred Hansen’s cache nearby. The two scientists ate one of the puddings on the spot. Geoffrey saved the other until his wedding day to Greek cytologist Maria Keffalinou in 1955. Finally, at the summit of Mount Cooper Key, Geoffrey found a piece of Peary’s United States flag in a cocoa tin. He later returned the flag patch to Peary’s elderly widow.

Geoffrey and Blackader returned to Alert and made dogsled reconnaissances up Clements Markham Inlet and to Floeberg Beach. They then hiked up the Wood River to its headwaters to measure snow depths of the glaciers and made the first ascent of Mount Grant. Their remarkable season ended with a further trek to Black Cape, south of Alert, where they inspected a well-stocked cairn left in 1876 by British officers Giffard and Conybeare. Years later, Geoffrey befriended Conybeare’s widow, Constance, and the guest book at Geoffrey’s home, which visitors still signed decades later, was a gift from her.

The 1953 field season combined all the elements of Geoffrey's interests. He made a preliminary study of Ellesmere's ice shelves, lived the hard physical life that had made him so happy during his summers in the English woods, and connected with Arctic history in a way that few had done before.

The 1954 season furthered Geoffrey's Renaissance interests. It was, he later said, "the most memorable of all my eighteen seasons in northern Ellesmere." Leading a four-man group that included Bert Crary, Bill Marshall, and Robert Christie, Geoffrey established a fixed camp on the ice shelf just west of Ward Hunt Island.

The party cored into the ice shelf and installed thermocouples. Still with an eye on historic sites, Geoffrey made a side trip to recover a 44-year-old note left by Godfred Hansen at Peary's Crane City depot, south of Cape Aldrich. He and Robert Christie then dogsledded all the way west to Lands Lokk, making Geoffrey the first person since Peary to travel the entire north coast. In an old Peary cairn near Lands Lokk, he found a Krüger note from 22 April 1930.

Back at Ward Hunt Island, Geoffrey and Bert Crary manhauled north through rough ice to take ocean depths and temperatures and collect water samples for salinity. He sounded the lake on Ward Hunt Island and climbed the island's highest point, later known as Walker Hill. They were only the third party to set foot on Ward Hunt Island, after Aldrich in 1876 and Donald MacMillan in 1909. While recovering equipment on the ice shelf in late summer, they waded stoically through 47 meltwater troughs. They continued working until freeze-up in mid-September allowed an aircraft from Alert to pick them up.

They had been out on the ice for five months. In that time, they had begun to address nearly all the main problems of the ice shelves and the geology and geomorphology of northern Ellesmere Island. While flying back south through Thule Air Base in Greenland, Geoffrey noted with pleasure how RCMP constables from Ellesmere Island shrewdly wore their red serge dress uniforms when passing through Thule, because with such fine garments, it was automatically assumed that they were officers and entitled to the benefits thereof.

For his work on Ellesmere's glaciers, Geoffrey earned a DPhil from Oxford in 1956. He also spent 1955 and 1956 preparing to lead the upcoming International Geophysical Year on Ellesmere Island. Based at Lake Hazen, the 1957–58 program studied the Gilman Glacier, did seismic and gravitational testing, extracted cores, and began limnology work on Lake Hazen. J.S. Tener surveyed wildlife, especially muskoxen, J.H. Soper studied plant ecology and the Hazen area's unusual microclimate, and Moreau Maxwell excavated archaeological sites. Four students overwintered at Lake Hazen. The multi-pronged program continued into the summer of 1958, and long-term studies of the Gilman Glacier went on for several years.

As Operation Hazen phased out, Geoffrey turned to leading Operation Tanquary, which ran from 1962 to 1970 out of Tanquary Fiord, now the headquarters of

Quttinirpaaq National Park. Early snow machines (now stored at Tanquary as historic relics) had by now partly replaced dog teams. The fieldwork followed the same multifaceted approach as the previous studies out of Lake Hazen, focusing on regional glaciology, meteorology, and oceanography. In 1965, he ventured far west to reconnoiter the unnamed ice cap above the Otto Glacier. Still intent on combining glaciology with mountaineering, in 1967 Geoffrey made the first ascent of what he later christened Barbeau Peak, at 2665 m the highest mountain in Canada and the United States east of the Rockies.

One summer at Tanquary, he was joined by archaeologist Eigil Knuth, who was making a rare trip away from his beloved North Greenland. When Geoffrey hiked up to visit him at his excavation site by Kettle Lake one evening, Knuth mused that Tanquary was even more beautiful than North Greenland. Recalled Geoffrey: "It was as if he'd just said, 'You know, your wife is more beautiful than mine.'"

During his work on northern Ellesmere, Geoffrey and his team assigned 101 place-names. He was the first to revisit many historic cairns, and he relished sampling decades-old explorers' rum. He authored dozens of papers on his Arctic and Antarctic work, some of which appeared, not surprisingly, in the *Canadian Alpine Journal*.

Geoffrey's father died in 1969, and eventually, Geoffrey, Maria and their two girls moved back to the family home in England. He worked for the British Antarctic Survey as Secretary of the Antarctic Place-Names Committee until his retirement in 1990. He continued to write on the glaciology of northern Ellesmere and completed three books on place-names in the Falkland Islands Dependencies, the British Antarctic Territory, and what is now Quttinirpaaq National Park in Nunavut.

In his later years, Geoffrey wrote authoritative obituaries of many Arctic friends and colleagues, including Moira Dunbar, Robert Christie, Trevor Harwood, and Harold Serson. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Arctic Institute of North America; he served as president of the Canadian Arctic Circle Club, the Arctic Club of Britain, and the Antarctic Club. Cape Hattersley-Smith on the Antarctic Peninsula commemorates his work there. In 2006, he was awarded the Polar Medal, with Arctic and Antarctic clasps.

During his people-rich life, he met countless legends: Wop May, the bush pilot who tracked down the Mad Trapper of Rat River; Henry Stallworthy of the RCMP; author Wilfrid Thesiger; Lord Edward Shackleton, son of Ernest and leader of the 1934–35 Oxford University expedition to Ellesmere; as well as acclaimed mountaineers Eric Shipton, Chris Bonington, and H.W. ("Major") Tilman, who was a frequent guest at the family home. When Geoffrey asked J.B. Tyrrell what he took for food on his barren ground explorations, Tyrrell, then in his late nineties, replied haughtily, "A gun."

Geoffrey is survived by his wife Maria and daughters Fiona and Kara. Until the end of his life, his home was a gathering point and even a place of pilgrimage for those

bitten by the Arctic. And while Geoffrey would not have considered himself an explorer, he was, at the very least, a pioneer of Arctic science. Yet that was not what this graceful gentleman valued most highly. “What’s important,” he liked to say, “is not what [people] did but what they were like. What they did is soon overtaken by the next chap that comes along.”

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