

InfoNorth

Five Hundred Meetings of the Arctic Circle

by C.R. Burn

THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, AN OPEN CLUB FOUNDED to bring together friends interested in all aspects of the North, celebrated its 500th meeting on 8 April 2014. The Circle, conceived on 30 October 1947, was the brainchild of Graham and Diana Rowley and Tom and Jackie Manning, who recognized the need in Ottawa for an informal but regular gathering of people interested in the Arctic. At the time, these people were almost all working for departments and agencies of the federal government, but in an institution notorious for its silos, many were unaware of each other's work, interests, plans, and ideas. The Canadian Arctic had played but a small part in the Second World War, but it became a focus of much greater strategic concern during the Cold War, leading at first to military exercises and training activities, but later also to more resonant national and scientific interest.

The Rowleys and Mannings organized a meeting of 14 people on 14 November 1947, to discuss and test their idea, and held the inaugural meeting of the club on 8 December 1947. About a hundred men attended this first meeting, which had been arranged at the RCAF Officer's Mess, 158 Gloucester Street, to begin at 8 p.m. The meeting attendees watched a film by Flt. Lt. A.H. Tinker entitled *The Establishment of Weather Stations at Eureka Sound and Cornwallis Island by Task Force 68*. They then agreed on the name of the club—The Arctic Circle—and an annual subscription of \$2 for residents of Ottawa and \$1 for others. It had become clear before the meeting that another venue would be needed for the second and subsequent meetings, because at that time, women and NCOs were not permitted by the Mess to attend functions on the premises. Fortunately, arrangements could be made at the 1st Corps Troops RCASC Sergeants' Mess, 278 Sparks Street, which had no such restrictions. The informality of these early meetings was enforced by poor soundproofing separating the Circle meeting from the sergeants' wives regular whist drive on the floor above, and the choruses of the Arctic Circle "choir" after the meetings. Erling Porsild was the first president.

For each of its subsequent 67 years, the Circle has met regularly between October and early May, and since 1959 there has been a splendid Annual Dinner. The venues have moved around town—at one point the sofas were so comfortable people complained they could not stay awake

during the talks and the meetings should therefore be moved! The Circle seems to be happy in its present accommodation at the location of the first meeting, where admittance restrictions have relaxed with the passage of time. In the first 10 years, only four of the speakers were women, but in the last decade more than 20 women have held the floor. There were 79 meetings in 1947–58, of which 16 covered government operations, 12 the natural sciences, 9 issues of development, and 13 human society. In the last decade, although only 69 meetings have been held, the corresponding numbers were 11, 29, 3, and 20, respectively. As Northerners have assumed control of development within the territories, Ottawa's role has diminished, and the range of interests active here in the South has shifted. Films were shown regularly at the Circle meetings, often introduced by someone connected with the project being portrayed. At one point (2 February 1955), the meeting was a press conference with the Hon. Jean Lesage, then Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources. Imagine the chances of such a dialogue today! Full lists of the meetings (Table 1) and the annual dinners (Table 2) are available as online supplements to this essay (<http://arctic.journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/arctic/index.php/arctic/arctic>) and are also available from the Arctic Circle web site, under the library tab (www.thearcticcircle.ca).

The list of those who have addressed the Circle over the years makes a formidable selection of Canadian Arctic experts. More than 370 people have addressed the meetings, and several have done so more than once. The topics have covered a catholic selection of issues and matters relating to the North, such as archaeology, botany, circumpolar issues, community development, federal research and administrative initiatives, fisheries, glaciology, geology, history, Inuit art, marine resources, medicine and health, migratory birds, military matters, oil and gas, palaeontology, parks, permafrost, Quaternary studies, travel and transportation, sovereignty, and surveying. Many names stand out, and I am conscious that this is a small, personal selection of those now passed on: Patrick Baird, Roger Brown, Keith Greenaway, R.S. Finnie, Fritz Koerner, Jose Kusugak, Maurice Haycock, James Houston, George Jacobsen, Henry Larsen, R.F. Legget, C.S. Lord, Erling Porsild, T.C. Pullen, and Vilhjalmur Stefansson. Representatives of the diplomatic corps have been invited to speak, the most frequent, over

the years, being the ambassadors of Norway, and for about 20 years the club has annually invited a student speaker, the most recent (14 January 2014) being Brendan O'Neill from Carleton University, who discussed permafrost and road embankments on the Peel Plateau.

The list of speakers contains relatively few individuals from Quebec, outside the National Capital Region, and relatively few Aboriginal people. This reflects the nature of Ottawa's engagement with the Arctic over the last 70 years, and the fact that the club does not provide either expenses or honoraria, so the vast majority of speakers live locally, and the dues remain low. Nevertheless, some of the talks have been prescient of current activities, such as the address by Murray Watts on 9 February 1965, on the Mary River iron ore deposit, and others, for example, that of Mr. J.C. Wyatt on 14 April 1949 on construction problems in the Arctic, have presented themes that do not seem to go away.

In addition to the desirability of regular meetings, the inaugural meeting expressed interest in the production of a mimeographed bulletin to act as a newsletter, reporting activities of the club, activities of the members, and other Arctic news. At the suggestion of Supt. D.J. Martin, the bulletin was given the name the *Arctic Circular*. Diana Rowley agreed to be the editor, a duty she rigorously fulfilled for 20 years. The first issue of the *Circular*, which was distributed to members before the second meeting on 15 January 1948, contains a succinct statement of editorial policy: (1) to provide concise and accurate information on current activities in the Arctic; (2) to assist research by publishing requests for information on particular regions or subjects, and for collection of specimens. The contributions were to be published as short articles or notes, not full-length papers. These notes, many of which are extremely well written, not only provide a glimpse of the ambitions and plans of the members for Arctic activities, but also in some cases furnish a perspective on the North held in Ottawa at the time. The *Circular* was thorough, and it required a remarkable amount of effort, as the material was edited, typed, mimeographed, and mailed to the membership several times each year.

The first volumes of the *Circular* were published when interest in the North was slowly gaining momentum. They portray a life that would be unfamiliar to many today. For example, a letter from J.A. Warwick (1948) describes the arrival by parachute of U.S. Army Air Forces doctor Major Maunz at Clyde Inlet Ionospheric Station (Clyde River) in November 1943 to attend to the cook, Robert Gill, who had contracted acute appendicitis. The operation was performed successfully on the kitchen table. "However while his patient was convalescing, Major Maunz decided to build a snowmobile from an engine belonging to the Hudson's Bay factor. This engine was large and unwieldy and one day, in attempting to move it, Major Maunz rolled it onto his foot and broke his ankle. Major Maunz set the cast on his own ankle and remained at Clyde Inlet until the ice was thick enough for a plane to land and take him out."

These issues also contain comments on developments described in the press, such as C.S. Lord's (1949) article on the Firth River gold prospects, but many of the pages concern the logistics of travel and development of infrastructure and knowledge to enable safe aviation, in particular magnetic and meteorological data collection. There is an early comment on climate change in the Arctic by A.E. Porsild (1949). As the *Circular* developed a following, some original notes were contributed, such as the first report of cancer in lemmings born and kept in captivity in Ottawa by Tom Manning (1953), and in the same issue, a preliminary study of the Blue and Lesser Snow Geese on Southampton Island, by Graham Cooch (1953). Later that year, there is an Anonymous (1953), but informative, summary of the 1951 census in the Northwest Territories (then including, of course, what is now Nunavut). We might suspect that the editor had a significant role in the preparation of that article. The articles became more definitive with time, and in the 1970s reflected the considerable debate prompted by the prospects of rapid development in the North and quite divergent views (e.g., Passmore, 1970). Interest in Greenland is, sadly, not now apparent in Ottawa, but was well represented in the early years of the Arctic Circle, not only in the *Circular*, but also in the speakers who addressed the meetings (e.g., Brown, 1949).

The close association between several members and the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge meant that much of the information in the *Circular* was also distributed in the *Polar Record*. When *Arctic* began publication, also in 1948, a similar arrangement was offered. No problems occurred because Diana Rowley edited *Arctic* from 1949 to 1955. The *Circular* was published regularly until 1983, when the proliferation of Arctic activities and associations made it too difficult to provide comprehensive coverage. Various associations and agencies, such as the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee and the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, produced their own newsletters, reducing the need for the *Circular*. In the last issue (Vol. 32 for 1984, which did not appear until 1988), Diana published "A short history of the Arctic Circle" (Rowley, 1988). Much of what has been written here derives from this paper. In 2012, the *Circular* was scanned by Peter Morse and uploaded onto the club's website, where all issues may be accessed directly under the library tab.

Any association can continue only if the members support the activities and dedicated volunteers cheerfully take on the leg work. Tom Frisch and David Terroux have been Secretary and Treasurer for two and a half decades, since 1989 and 1986, respectively. It is quite remarkable that more than 100 people attended the celebratory dinner to mark the 500th meeting, and the regular meetings attract 40–50 people throughout the season. The Arctic Circle continues to fulfill the role Graham, Diana, Tom, and Jackie envisioned nearly 70 years ago, and we are blessed with Diana's continuing presence among us.

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