

BRIAN SAGAR
(1927-1990)

Brian Sagar, African and arctic traveller, died of cancer on 12 January 1990. A member of the Arctic Institute of North America, he ended his life half a world away from the town of Colne in Lancashire, England, where he was born in 1927. At the time of his death Brian was Associate Professor of Geography at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Like many university graduates in post-war Britain, Brian planned a career in teaching and took his B.Sc. at Hull University in 1950 and a Diploma in Education a year later.

Then Africa called. Brian was recruited as a manager by the United Africa Company as the sun set on the British Empire. We met in 1952 when I joined the company and arrived in Kano in northern Nigeria. At that time Brian travelled around the semi-desert north of the city, supervising small outstations and buying produce, living a nomadic life out of a "kit car" (a half-ton truck). Once in a while he came to Kano for rest and relaxation with a group of young bachelors, and we had many memorable times together. Both of us felt ill at ease playing the colonial commercial game as Nigeria struggled towards independence. Like many outdoor men, Brian appreciated the empty places of the planet. But as a thoughtful, caring person he also sought ways to contribute to society. I lasted a year with the company. Brian stayed with UAC until 1955, then resigned to return to England and teach geography and chemistry at Manchester Grammar School.

A dog in a pub pointed him north.

I'd spent the summer of 1957 on "Operation Hazen," the Defence Research Board's contribution to the International Geophysical Year, in northern Ellesmere Island. Home on vacation, I met Brian in a pub opposite Manchester University. We were well into our cups when we noticed a dog that had been trained to carry empty glasses back to the bar. I'd been asked to keep an eye out for an assistant glaciologist for Operation Hazen's 1958 summer. "How are you with dogs?" I asked Brian, for we'd used Greenland Huskies to move around the ice cap. "Not bad," replied Brian. "How would you like to go on an arctic expedition?" I continued. "Well, I'd think about it," Brian replied. He did, the necessary connections were made, and the next time I saw his broad grin was in Churchill, Manitoba, where the expedition assembled.

The Arctic bonds people in a peculiar way — or turns them into enemies. Brian and I shared a tent during the summer of 1958 and never spoke a cross word. I tended the meteorological instruments at the camp on the Gilman glacier, while Brian travelled into the ice cap. Those on Operation Hazen came from different countries and diverse disciplines, but the harsh land made us a band of brothers, and those summers on Ellesmere Island have a Camelot quality to them.

Brian received his M.Sc. from McGill University in 1959 for his thesis on cold climates and glacier mass balance. He returned to northern Ellesmere Island during the summers of 1959-61 with the Defence Research Board, the Arctic Institute of North America and the Geophysics Research Directorate of the United States Air Force. In December 1961, Brian joined the Geographical Branch in Ottawa and continued his arctic

research on the Barnes Ice Cap of central Baffin Island in the summers up to 1966. Brian was an arctic field man *par excellence*, strong, tough, uncomplaining, as he carried out surveys, made measurements, wrote up his papers and reports and paved the way for those who came after him.

In July 1966, Brian became Assistant Professor of Geography at Simon Fraser University. Here he combined his love for and knowledge of Africa and the Arctic in teaching physical geography, the geography of natural hazards and a regional course on Africa. In the mountains of British Columbia, Brian continued his research in climatology and glaciology. At home in North Vancouver, he gave unstintingly of his time and his abilities in public service and professional development. From 1976 to 1979, Brian was Organizing Secretary of the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society, and he served as President of the Simon Fraser University Faculty Association and of the B.C. College and University Faculty Association. He was active also in environmental matters and with the New Democratic Party. He also found time for wilderness hiking and camping with his wife, Norma, whom he married in 1964.



Brian Sagar on the Gilman Glacier, summer 1958, northern Ellesmere Island, with king dog "Kippy."

A quiet, meticulous man, Brian Sagar was a boon companion in the tent and on the trail, never short of ideas, perceptive observations and anecdotes. He told once of running out of tobacco on an ice cap and stuffing the bowl of his pipe with dried, used tea. "How was it?" I asked. "Terrible!" Brian replied in his terse and factual way. Brian never made any spectacular scientific discoveries or published the ultimate paper in his chosen field. He simply did his job and his duty to others, enriching the lives of all those he met with his words and his compassion. His sometimes sardonic sense of humour and broad grin masked a man of deep thought, who never took himself seriously, but who cared passionately for others and for the earth. I spoke with him last by phone in October 1989. He told me of the great pride he took in his compost

heap, and we talked of the possibility of holding a reunion of the members of Operation Hazen.

Brian died as he lived — with courage and grace. To the end he believed that life was marvellous and told Norma to give all his friends a final message — “Pip-pip, cheerio!”

Brian and Norma had bought land in Powell River, planning to retire there this year. That was not to be. His ashes lie there, part of the land he loved so well. His death has diminished all of us who have known the camaraderie of life in the world's

empty, harsh and lovely places. But he has left in the hearts and minds of all who knew him an undying memory of a decent, honest man who lived his life to the fullest.

*Jim Lotz
Box 3393 (S)
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
B3J 3J1*