

**THE REINDEER BOTANIST:
ALF ERLING PORSILD, 1901-1977**

by Wendy Dathan

ISBN 978-1-55238-587-6

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

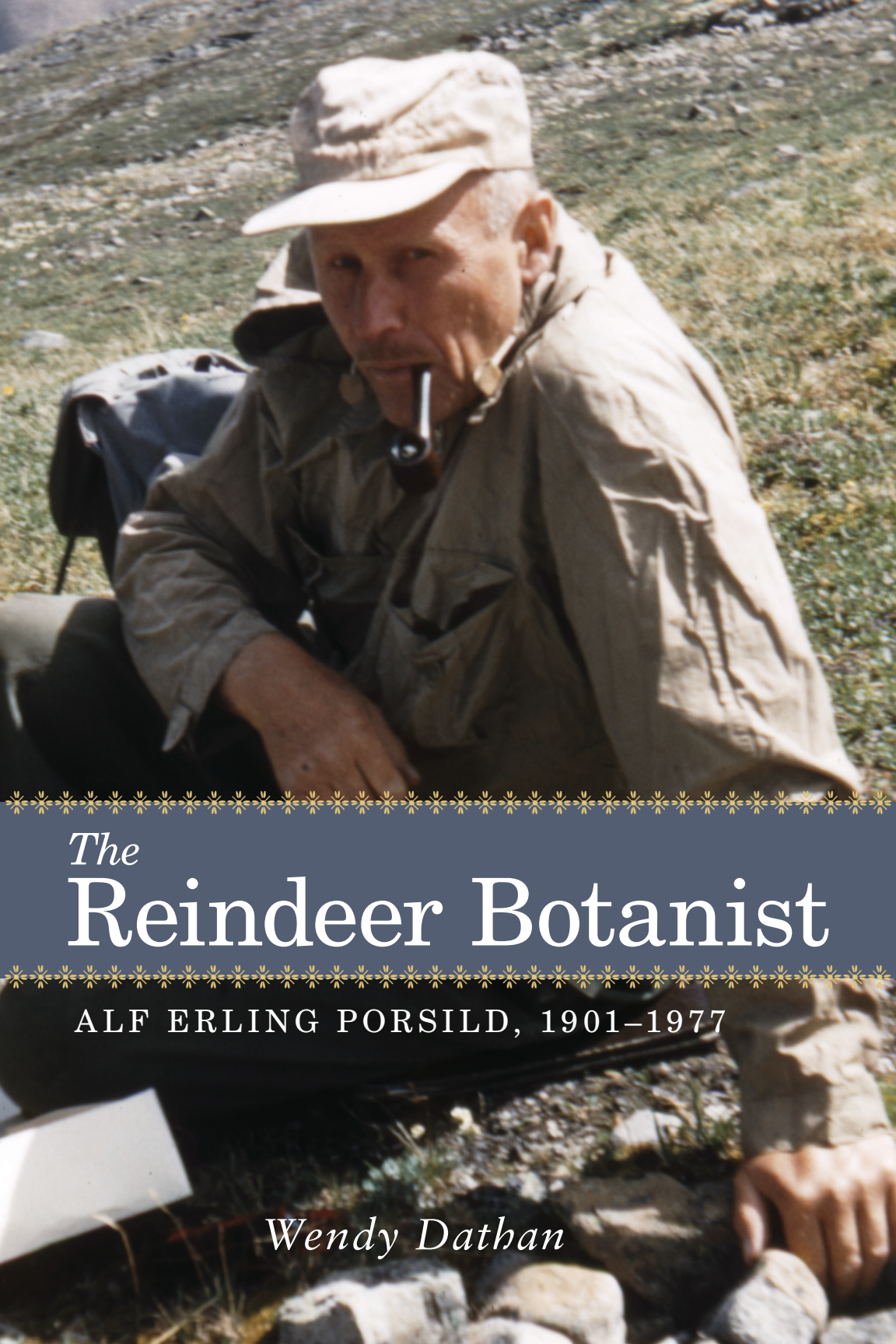
This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



The
Reindeer Botanist

ALF ERLING PORSILD, 1901–1977

Wendy Dathan

The
Reindeer Botanist

NORTHERN LIGHTS SERIES

COPUBLISHED WITH THE ARCTIC INSTITUTE OF NORTH AMERICA

ISSN 1701-0004 (PRINT) ISSN 1925-2943 (ONLINE)

This series takes up the geographical region of the North (circumpolar regions within the zone of discontinuous permafrost) and publishes works from all areas of northern scholarship, including natural sciences, social sciences, earth sciences, and the humanities.

- No. 1 · **Nunavik: Inuit-Controlled Education in Arctic Quebec** Ann Vick-Westgate · Copublished with the Katujiniq Regional Development Council
- No. 2 · **Many Faces of Gender: Roles and Relationships through Time in Northern Indigenous Communities** Edited by Lisa Frink, Rita S. Shepard, and Gregory A. Reinhardt · Copublished with University Press of Colorado
- No. 3 · **New Owners in their Own Land: Minerals and Inuit Land Claims** Robert McPherson
- No. 4 · **War North of 80: The Last German Arctic Weather Station of World War II** Wilhelm Dege, translated and edited by William Barr · Copublished with University Press of Colorado
- No. 5 · **Writing Geographical Exploration: Thomas James and the Northwest Passage 1631–33** Wayne K.D. Davies
- No. 6 · **As Long as This Land Shall Last: A History of Treaty 8 and Treaty 11, 1870–1939** René Fumoleau
- No. 7 · **Breaking Ice: Renewable Resource and Ocean Management in the Canadian North** Edited by Fikret Berkes, Rob Huebert, Helen Fast, Micheline Manseau, and Alan Diduck
- No. 8 · **Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Inupiaq Eskimos** Ernest S. Burch · Copublished with the University of Nebraska Press
- No. 9 · **Tanana and Chandalar: The Alaska Field Journals of Robert A. McKennan** Edited by Craig Mishler and William E. Simeone · Copublished with University of Alaska Press
- No. 10 · **Resurrecting Dr. Moss: The Life and Letters of a Royal Navy Surgeon, Edward Lawton Moss, MD, RN, 1837–1880** Paul C. Appleton, edited by William Barr
- No. 11 · **Lands that Hold One Spellbound: A Story of East Greenland** Spencer Apollonio
- No. 12 · **Biocultural Diversity and Indigenous Ways of Knowing: Human Ecology in the Arctic** Karim-Aly S. Kassam
- No. 13 · **Arctic Scientist, Gulag Survivor: The Biography of Mikhail Mikhailovich Ermolaev, 1905–1991** A.M. Ermolaev and V.D. Dibner, translated and edited by William Barr
- No. 14 · **The Reindeer Botanist: Alf Erling Porsild, 1901–1977** Wendy Dathan



The
Reindeer Botanist



ALF ERLING PORSILD, 1901–1977

NORTHERN LIGHTS SERIES
ISSN 1701-0004 (Print) ISSN 1925-2943 (Online)

Wendy Dathan

© 2012 Wendy Dathan

University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2N 1N4
www.uofcpress.com

This book is available as an ebook which is licensed under a Creative Commons license. The publisher should be contacted for any commercial use which falls outside the terms of that license.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Dathan, Patricia Wendy, 1934-
The reindeer botanist [electronic resource] : Alf Erling Porsild,
1901-1977 / Wendy Dathan.

(Northern lights, 1925-2943 ; 14)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Electronic monograph.

Issued also in print format.

Co-published by: Arctic Institute of North America.

ISBN 978-1-55238-587-6 (PDF).--ISBN 978-1-55238-588-3 (PDF).--ISBN 978-1-55238-589-0 (HTML)

1. Porsild, A. E., 1901-1977. 2. Botanists--Canada--Biography.
3. Scientists--Canada--Biography. 4. Botany--Canada, Northern.
5. Reindeer farming--Canada, Northern. 6. Canadian Reindeer Project--
History. 7. National Herbarium of Canada--History. I. Arctic Institute
of North America II. Title. III. Title: Alf Erling Porsild, 1901-1977.
IV. Series: Northern lights series (Online) ; 14

QK31.P67D38 2012

580.92

C2012-904995-6

The University of Calgary Press acknowledges the support of the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Multimedia Development Fund for our publications. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for our publishing activities. We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

**Government
of Alberta** ■

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Cover design, page design, and typesetting by Melina Cusano

CONTENTS

Abbreviations	vii
Foreword by Irwin M. Brodo	ix
Preface	xiii
Introduction	xix

PART ONE

Reindeer Survey / Exploration, 1901–1928

1. Greenland Beginnings	3
2. Malte and the National Herbarium	15
3. Call of the Northwest	25
4. In Search of Reindeer	33
5. Little Diomedede to Kotzebue Sound	45
6. Coastal Alaska by Dogsled	57
7. Travelling Alone: An Accident and its Consequences	69
8. Mail Time in Aklavik	83
9. Schooner Travel on the Arctic Coast	95
10. Return to Aklavik	109
11. Completing the 1927 Reconnaissance	119
12. Looking Back and Forward	131
13. Winter Trail to Great Bear Lake	139
14. Dease Arm and the Northeast Barrens	151
15. Changing Tides and Seasons	163
16. Of Ice and “Flies” and Miserable Dogs	173
17. McTavish Arm and Conjuror Bay	187
18. End of the Investigation	199

PART TWO

Canada’s Reindeer Herd, 1929–1935

19. Results of the Survey	217
20. “The Best Laid Plans”	227
21. Field Reports, 1930	239
22. Sad News and Summer in Scandinavia	253
23. Destination Reindeer Station	265

24. The Drive Continues	279
25. The End of the Project	291

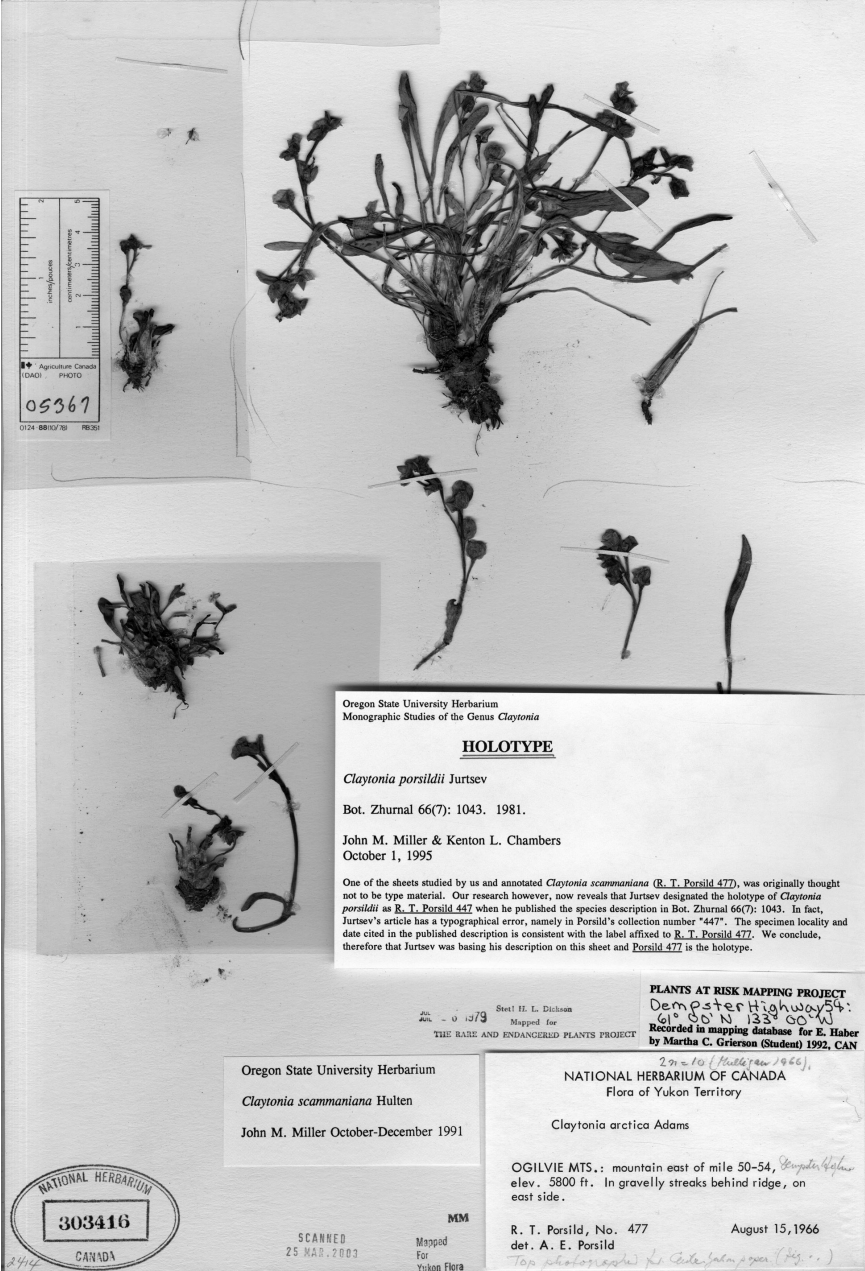
PART THREE

The National Herbarium in Peace and War, 1936–1977

26. The National Herbarium	309
27. “Publish or Perish”	327
28. Rumbles on the Horizon	349
29. The Problem of Greenland	367
30. Consular Greenland	385
31. Herbarium Interlude	405
32. Greenland’s War of Nerves	421
33. Uncertainties in Wartime Ottawa	439
34. Acting Consuls Dunbar and Porsild	457
35. Last Consular Year	473
36. Road to the Yukon	489
37. The Year the War Ended	511
38. Postwar Settlement	529
39. The “Old Man” of the Herbarium	551
40. Storm Over the Arctic	569
41. Study Year in Europe	595
42. Rocky Mountains and Hudson Bay Lowlands	613
43. Ninth International Botanical Congress	627
44. The Last Years	643
 Epilogue: Closing the Circle	 657
 Notes	 663
Sources and Acknowledgments	689
Selected References	695
Index	705

ABBREVIATIONS

- AEP Alf Erling Porsild
- CMNA Canadian Museum of Nature Archives
- CRP Canadian Reindeer Project
- LAC Library and Archives of Canada
- LFP Lomen Family Papers, Elmer E. Rasmussen Library,
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
- MCA Museum of Civilization Archives
- MOM M. Oscar Malte
- MPP Morten Pedersen Porsild
- NAC/PAC National Archives of Canada/Public Archives of Canada
(since 2004 combined as Library and Archives Canada, see
LAC)
- NHC National Herbarium of Canada
- NHF National Herbarium correspondence files not in NAC/PAC or
CMNA at time of research
- OSF O. S. Finnie
- ROM Royal Ontario Museum, Porsild Collection
- RTP Robert Thorbjørn Porsild



05367
Agriculture Canada
CGC - PHOTO
0124 8810/93 RB/21

Oregon State University Herbarium
Monographic Studies of the Genus *Claytonia*

HOLOTYPE

Claytonia porsildii Jurtsev

Bot. Zhurnal 66(7): 1043. 1981.

John M. Miller & Kenton L. Chambers
October 1, 1995

One of the sheets studied by us and annotated *Claytonia scammaniana* (R. T. Porsild 477), was originally thought not to be type material. Our research however, now reveals that Jurtsev designated the holotype of *Claytonia porsildii* as R. T. Porsild 447 when he published the species description in Bot. Zhurnal 66(7): 1043. In fact, Jurtsev's article has a typographical error, namely in Porsild's collection number "447". The specimen locality and date cited in the published description is consistent with the label affixed to R. T. Porsild 477. We conclude, therefore that Jurtsev was basing his description on this sheet and Porsild 477 is the holotype.

Jul. - 0 1979 Steel H. L. Dishoon
Mapped for
THE RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS PROJECT

PLANTS AT RISK MAPPING PROJECT
Dempster Highway 54:
61° 50' N 133° 00' W
Recorded in mapping database for E. Haber
by Martha C. Grierson (Student) 1992, CAN

Oregon State University Herbarium
Claytonia scammaniana Hulten
John M. Miller October-December 1991

27-10 (Hillebrand 1966)
NATIONAL HERBARIUM OF CANADA
Flora of Yukon Territory
Claytonia arctica Adams

NATIONAL HERBARIUM
303416
CANADA

SCANNED
25 MAR 2003
MM
Mapped
For
Yukon Flora

OGILVIE MTS.: mountain east of mile 50-54, Dempster Highway
elev. 5800 ft. In gravelly streaks behind ridge, on
east side.
R. T. Porsild, No. 477 August 15, 1966
det. A. E. Porsild
Top photograph by J. C. G. (John) G. (1966)

HOLOTYPE, *Claytonia porsildii* Jurtsev collected by R. T. Porsild off Dempster Highway, 15 August 1966 (National Herbarium of Canada, No. 303416; with permission of the Canadian Museum of Nature)

Foreword

Botanists are often stereotyped as shy, quiet people who pick flowers and spend long hours in front of a microscope. What, then, are we to make of Alf Erling Porsild, with a rifle on his shoulder, fighting arctic blizzards, and travelling hundreds of miles on dogsled through the frozen north, organizing a huge reindeer drive, and paddling rivers in the Canadian wilderness that few white men had ever seen while at the same time making major discoveries of plants of all kinds over terrain covered with half-frozen peat and home to billions of mosquitoes and black flies? This is the botanist we meet in Wendy Dathan's remarkable book.

When I was invited to visit Ottawa and the National Museum of Canada as a prospective addition to the Botany staff, I had only scant knowledge of Erling Porsild. I had been told that he was an arctic botanist, but that was no surprise considering that Canada has more arctic territory than almost any nation on earth. He ushered me into his modest office on the fourth floor of the Victoria Memorial Museum Building, filling his pipe and puffing away as he asked me a few questions about myself and my aspirations. He was a big man (or so he seemed to me), but he was soft-spoken, warm, and welcoming. I told him that I had just begun work at Chatham College in Pittsburgh and was happy there. I wasn't sure I wanted to move to a new job in a new country so soon. Erling puffed a bit on his pipe and said something like, "Nonsense. The National Museum is a fine place to work and you should come here. You will regret it if you don't. Such opportunities do not come often." He spoke softly, decisively, and persuasively.

In the decade that followed, I got to know Erling a little better, but never very well, certainly not as well as I would have liked. When he wasn't in the field or travelling to conferences, he kept busy in his office, studying specimens or updating distribution maps of arctic plants, which were bound in notebooks on a large table in his office-lab. (He told me later that it had been used by John Macoun.) He obviously loved his work, but he did not like meetings and bureaucracy, and he very rarely called staff meetings. If he was not deep into a project, he would sometimes take the time to remark about his arctic experiences, even spinning out a story about one of his many adventures (with polar bears, foul weather, odd people he met ...), but I never knew how rich those

experiences were until I read Wendy Dathan's book. Erling was a wonderful storyteller. Now that I know more about what he (and his equally remarkable brother Robert) went through, especially in those early days of exploration, I would love to have just one more evening with my old boss.

Wendy has taken Erling's journals, notes, and correspondence and woven them into a compelling narrative so skillfully that the reader will sometimes feel like an additional member of his field party. We feel the cold wind biting our face and the maddening attack of millions of biting insects, the frustration of strong headwinds in a canoe and the worry caused by high fever and sickness far from any medical help. We learn also about the frustrations and, dare I say, occasional insanities of working with the Canadian Government bureaucracy.

Why are we drawn to find out more about Erling Porsild? Because he was among the last of the botanical explorers who travelled into the Canadian wilderness before planes could pluck you up and put you down on almost any body of water more than a half-mile long. His plant presses were loaded on dogsleds and canoes, and yet they bore a wealth of new botanical discoveries. As a scientist, Erling was widely respected. His knowledge of the arctic and boreal flora of North America and Greenland could hardly be surpassed by anyone living at the time. His field experience made his opinions about the classification of arctic plants authoritative, and, although Erling had some professional rivals and some ongoing differences of opinion (including a well-publicized exchange with Farley Mowat), his many books and articles remain valuable references to this day. The stories behind some of the more important publications unfold in Wendy Dathan's book, and we meet many of the people that had major impacts on botanical science, especially in the fields of taxonomy and floristics, over the forty-year period from 1925 to 1965. Equally engrossing are the chapters covering the war years, when Erling was made Acting Consul for Greenland because of his intimate knowledge of Greenlandic people, languages, and terrain, and when his botanical expertise was critical in helping the Canadian military uncover the launch site of Japanese fire bombs.

Yet Erling was a modest and quiet man, easy to talk to. He and his wife, Margrit, frequently invited staff or colleagues to their home for marvelous home-cooked meals that were almost invariably followed by wonderful stories of his experiences. They were evenings I will not easily forget.

So, sit down with Wendy Dathan's recounting of the life of Erling Porsild, forget about botanical stereotypes, and enter the world of one of Canada's most interesting and accomplished scientists, a man who, although foreign-born, served Canada with distinction and dedication for fifty years.

Irwin M. Brodo
Research Lichenologist Emeritus
Canadian Museum of Nature
April 2012

PREFACE

Almost three decades have passed since Dr. Irwin Brodo of the National Herbarium of Canada first asked if I would be interested in doing a biography of Dr. Erling Porsild, who had retired in 1967 as Chief Botanist of the Herbarium after thirty-two years of curatorial service, and died in 1977 after a lifetime of work on the Arctic, Sub-Arctic, and Alpine flora of North America and Greenland. No one had worked on him since his death, and it was felt that as I had a background that included English and Botany I might be the person to tackle the job.

I had never met Erling Porsild. All I knew of him was that I had used his “Illustrated Flora of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago” on a collecting trip to Baffin Island with Dr. Dorothy Swales of Macdonald College of McGill University in the summer of 1978. Little did I know then how much of his botanical career was summarized in the small black dots on the plant distribution maps at the back of that much thumbed and underlined field guide; dots that showed where he had collected plants for his father on Disko Island when he was young and living at the Arctic Research Station and later as Canadian Vice/Acting Consul in Greenland during World War II; dots that marked where he and his brother had collected in Alaska, the Mackenzie River Delta area and Great Bear Lake during their first adventurous assignment with the Canadian Reindeer Project; more dots in the Arctic Archipelago illustrating his and other collections that led to his doctoral degree in 1955; even dots straying south down the Rockies that represented his southward chase for migrating northern species in his later collecting years.

With the generous encouragement of the staff of the National Herbarium, I was given free access to all the correspondence files before they were shipped out to the National Archives. This exceptional privilege brought rich research dividends, for the folders contained not only a great deal of personal information about the man himself but also the history of the Herbarium from its inception as part of the Victoria Memorial Museum (later the National Museum) around the turn of the twentieth century and by extension the history of the growth of Botany in Canada for close to three quarters of a hundred years afterwards. How they struggled, those early botanists and men of the Geological Survey teams, to bring back the unknown plants they found in our vast and

never-ending country! How much the times changed as their field specimens were brought back to be slowly, slowly organized and identified and catalogued by a burgeoning number of specialists in a movement that had started in the Herbarium with the father and son team of John and James Macoun and been carried on by Oscar Malte and Erling Porsild working alone until the end of the Second World War.

Porsild, it turned out, was a man of many parts. For his role as Reindeer Man, for which he first became well known in Canada, I turned for assistance to Professor Ludger Müller-Wille of the McGill University Geography Department who had done his doctoral degree on reindeer in Finland. Once enrolled as his student in the Master's program, an F.C.A.R. scholarship enabled me to go up to Ottawa for months on end to look at all the material on the Canadian Reindeer Project that was stored in the National Archives of Canada. A northern training grant from the Centre for Northern Studies at McGill University allowed me to travel to Alaska in 1985 to study the Lomen Family reindeer files in the Elmer E. Rasmussen Library in Fairbanks. Driving north from British Columbia up the Alaska Highway to the Arctic Circle north of Fairbanks, south to Denali and Anchorage, and east to Dawson and Whitehorse and the Canol Road as far as the road would take us gave me a feel for that magnificent northern terrain that no books or photographs could ever have given me, while flying over the Mackenzie River Delta brought a real appreciation of the difficulties of moving two and a half thousand reindeer from west to east over that watery expanse. With the help of the staff of the Inuvik Scientific Research Station, I visited what was left of Reindeer Station by boat travel down the muddy East Branch of the Mackenzie, and flew over the Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula in a small private plane in search of pingos and Canada's remaining herd.

Major changes in my own personal life interrupted the research for the next fifteen or so years as I moved from Montreal to the island of Grand Manan, New Brunswick. The Porsild material had to be stored in the attic of my old house and was in danger of going mouldy, but when all seventeen boxes were finally rescued everything was intact inside and I was able to spend another two winters in Ottawa looking at the diplomatic papers in the National Archives in search of Porsild the Consular Man. Canada's consular involvement with Greenland began in April 1940 when Denmark fell to the Nazis and the head of the Aluminum Company of Canada (ALCAN) was on the phone immediately to Ottawa in a panic over the threat to the only operating cryolite mine in the world located up a submarine-accessible fjord in S.W. Greenland,

cryolite being needed to turn bauxite into the aluminum desperately needed for the war effort. In the negotiations that followed, both the United States and Canada established consular services in Greenland, and Erling Porsild was seconded part-time from his botanical work to become Vice and then Acting Consul. The inevitable and long-winded reports for which External Affairs has become famous came from all the men involved in that wartime effort, men that included the wise and politically astute Kenneth Kirkwood, the friendly and irrepressible Maxwell Dunbar, the urbane Trevor Lloyd, and the man that Lloyd once called “the mighty Porsild,” and together they gave us an interesting picture of a Greenland that up to that date had been strictly out of bounds for most of the world except Denmark. To my knowledge, no one else has worked on the story of that northernmost outpost of Canada from 1940 to 1946.

Although I wished my biography to concentrate on Porsild’s working life and achievements, one of my earliest interviews was with his daughter Karin Lumsden and grand-daughter Jennifer Lumsden in order to find out something of his family life. I was somewhat disconcerted at this meeting to learn that Jennifer was also contemplating doing a biography of her grandfather. It was at this point that I nearly gave up the idea of doing what I had been asked to do, as I had no wish to compete or interfere with someone who obviously knew so much more about Porsild than I did. I really felt that I should withdraw until my advisers at the National Herbarium and McGill insisted that my professional approach was badly needed and could not be done by someone with no training in Botany, and in any case there was always room for more than one version of a life as interesting as that of Erling Porsild.

I also contacted Professor Hugh Raup of Harvard University, whose long friendship and working correspondence with Porsild was the highlight of the herbarium files. Unfortunately, we never met, because over the many years of their acquaintanceship, these two important but very human men had exchanged detailed information about their scientific findings, philosophies, failures and successes, their fieldwork and publications, and, in passing, added notes about their personal lives. Both were influential in the early days of the Arctic Institute of North America and other aspects of northern science, and their parallel work on the northern flora formed the building blocks for future studies of the Continental Northwest.

In writing the biography, I have been careful to keep within the style and tone of Porsild’s time. Throughout the text, I have quoted in detail from primary sources while trying to present original points of view in contexts that

do not distort or re-arrange the speaker's intention. As much as possible within quotations, I have allowed spelling and grammatical mistakes, or errors due to the writer's lack of familiarity with English, to stand untouched unless the meaning is unclear. Some connecting words that have been omitted in hasty writing or typing have been added, while some abbreviations have been written in full for the sake of clarity. The erratic and sometimes truncated use of common and scientific names as well as the lack of underlining scientific names in letters, notes, and diaries have sometimes been left as written in the hope the reader will understand. As the field of Botany is one of continual advancement, it should be noted that some of the botanical names given or used by Porsild during his career in Canada may have been changed after his lifetime, but they have been retained in the text as they can be found elsewhere as synonyms.

Other problems with names have included the need to distinguish between the three botanical Porsilds: Morten Pedersen Porsild; his oldest son, Robert Thorbjørn Porsild, who was called by his second name in Greenland and Denmark but in North America became better known as Robert or Bob Porsild; and the second son, Alf Erling Porsild, who detested the name Alf and always preferred to be called Erling. I have chosen to treat the senior Porsild formally by surname and to use the Christian names of his sons throughout the narrative, which worked reasonably well during the reindeer years when the brothers worked together but grew more awkward when Erling became "Mr. Porsild of the Herbarium" where his surname would be more appropriate. However, by that time, the reader could be expected to be accustomed to the use of his now-familiar Christian name and so it was continued.

Certain terms have been used or preserved in the text because they are historically apt. In order to conform with their earlier use, temperatures, weights and measurements have been left under the imperial British system rather than replacing them with metric equivalents. For the same reason, I have retained some words that today we would consider politically incorrect but which were simply in common usage and not intended to be inappropriate or derogatory at that earlier time. I have therefore continued to use the term "Lapp" with reference to the reindeer herders from Norway instead of injecting their preferred term "Sami" into or outside of quotations in the text. Similarly, although the present-day people of the Arctic prefer to be called "Yup'ik" in the Bering Sea area, "Inupiat" along the north coast of Alaska, "Inuvialuit" in the Mackenzie River Delta, and "Inuit" in the Eastern Arctic, I have followed historical precedent and used or allowed the terms "Esquimaux" or "Eskimo" in quotations and

in the narrative, except in situations of a more modern context. With regard to the Arctic people, it should be noted that the older terms are wider in interpretation and were used to distinguish all the aboriginal peoples across Arctic North America while the newer terms are more limited in their geography and often cannot be used as a substitute.

Wendy Dathan

INTRODUCTION

Alf Erling Porsild was unquestionably a man who looked to the North throughout his lifetime. He was only five years old when he crossed the Arctic Circle with his parents for the first time, and he and his siblings spent the early years of the twentieth century growing up in an Arctic research station on Disko Island, Greenland. Today, on the Tuktoyaktuk peninsula in what was Canada's Northwest Territories and is now Nunavut, there is a strange ice-cored hill called Porsild Pingo that was named after the quiet pipe-smoking Danish-Canadian who first put this Greenlandic-Inuit word into the English language. He was to make many such contributions to Canadian geography and science during his working lifetime, but his greatest efforts were in three widely separate arenas; namely, the Canadian Reindeer Project, 1926–35 and 1947, the Canadian Consulate in wartime Greenland, 1940–44, and Northern Botany and the National Herbarium of Canada, 1935–77.

A biography is a useful tool to cover such a wide field of endeavour, with its intimate recording of current philosophies and activities as well as the kind of firsthand details that give a basal reality to what we can learn about the subject's environs. Hence, in the case of Porsild, we have a fascinating life story of an unusual, ambitious, and adventurous man whose multi-faceted career in Canada gives us many social, scientific, and political insights into unexamined sections of our country's history.

As a key figure in the introduction of reindeer into Canada, Porsild's first service unfolds as a dramatic record of travelling hundreds of miles by dogsled in the bitter depths of winter, alone or accompanied by his brother Robert Porsild. It tells of coastal, lake, and river exploration by unreliable schooner and ice-threatened canoe, of swarming "flies" and lost dogs and an endless wait for the reindeer from Alaska to arrive at the East Branch of the slow north-moving Mackenzie River. The failure of the Canadian Reindeer Project to create a widespread herding industry from the Delta to Hudson Bay ended as an expensive disappointment for a government that had been inspired to try to improve the lot of the starving native peoples with this overly ambitious and ill-timed scheme, but it is Porsild's story that enables us to comprehend the full details of what happened and understand why it was doomed from the start, however much he tried to make the plan workable. After he left the project, it

was dogged by tragic deaths, mismanagement, and lack of local interest, until today our only consolation must be that the remaining herd is privately owned by a descendant of one of the original Sami herders brought by Porsild to train the Inuvialuit, and our reindeer still roam the area to which they were first consigned and supply some food and income to the people of the delta.

During his reindeer years, and later as expansion “north of sixty” followed river, road, and air corridors as far as the Arctic Archipelago, Porsild traced the ever-increasing access routes, gathering the huge collections of Arctic and sub-Arctic plants that formed the basis of his numerous scientific publications and the floral contributions that ultimately made him famous within national and international botanical circles. His many publications ranged from popular to scholarly, from a half-page scientific contribution to full-scale dissertations and floras. His collections, and those of his brother during the early and late gathering years, were duly placed in the National Herbarium of Canada in Ottawa, our historic storage area for dried, pressed, botanical material from every corner of the country dating back to the collections of Professor John Macoun, his son James, and the Geological Survey teams over the turn of the twentieth century. Plant collecting was no easy task for these early geo-botanists and explorers, including the Porsild brothers. Entire plants or parts of flowering trees and shrubs had to be gathered carefully, pressed between sheets of absorbent material, dried, and then, most importantly, kept dry until shipped out of the field, this while travelling and camping in remote areas under all kinds of difficult weather and other stressful conditions. Once inside the herbarium, they were mounted on sheets of stiff paper, labelled and sorted and placed in cabinets to keep them safe from insect and other damage, and were then available for the scientific study of voucher specimens for publication purposes as well as for noting plant variation and distribution and the documentation of plant occurrences over time.

The Macoun herbarium became part of the Victoria Memorial Museum, later the National Museum of Canada, and was curated by botanist Oscar Malte from the early 1920's to his unfortunate death while returning from Arctic fieldwork in 1933. In 1935, after Erling Porsild was at last able to leave Reindeer Station, he took up the task of identifying and re-organizing the vast number of plant specimens in the National Herbarium. His records and correspondence for the thirty-two years of his administration tell us much of the history of the institution, and, as sole Botanist in charge until the end of the Second World War and Chief Botanist until his retirement in 1967, his story equally delineates

the problems and advancement of Botany in Canada during this period. Perhaps the most interesting of the problems that occupied the botanists of the time involved the probable distribution of plants before, during, and after the last glacial ice sheets that all but covered the face of North America, and the migration of plants as well as people across the Bering land bridge.

Porsild's botanical work was forced to take second place during World War II when he was asked to play a political role in Greenland, his childhood homeland, in order to open the new Canadian Consulate in Godthaab (now Nuuk) in the spring of 1940. This post became important for maintaining friendly relations with our nearest neighbour after it had been cut off from its Danish mother country, leaving it, and us, in a vulnerable position from hostile war activity. The consular services were vital for the protection of Canada's aluminum industry, which relied on cryolite ore that was desperately needed in the bauxite conversion process and was obtainable from only one source in southwest Greenland, and our presence enabled the Canadian Government to keep a watch in U-boat-infested waters over incoming summer shipments to Arvida, Quebec, and outgoing food and other needed supplies to isolated Greenland and the Arctic islands, as well as to play a part in transporting badly needed Canadian-built planes to the United Kingdom. Of parallel interest to events in Greenland, the news of how the Herbarium was faring in Ottawa gives us an interesting picture of non-military scientists attempting to keep going with lost personnel, overcrowded and constantly moved work space, and research and salary cutbacks under the guise of support for the war effort.

Porsild's contributions to Canada during the reindeer and wartime years were not without sacrifice on his part, for they often delayed or brought his personal and scientific ambitions to a standstill. However, much of his latter political influence in Ottawa circles depended on his intimate scientific knowledge of the North. He was a founding member of the Arctic Circle and played a leading role in the creation of the Arctic Institute of North America. Due to his participation as a man behind the scenes in northern decision-making, we learn much about little-known segments of Canadian history that would otherwise simply be lost. In following his connection with the National Herbarium, we find that we have Erling Porsild to thank for much of the increase in our knowledge of the Arctic/subarctic flora of Canada and how it relates to the alpine flora of the Rockies, but until he was able to work for and receive his doctorate from Copenhagen in 1955 his singular lack of a university degree at even an undergraduate level was an enormous handicap for him to overcome,

and it is greatly to his credit and perseverance that he was able to continue and succeed in an increasingly stratified professional field. No less than a hundred and twenty-eight publications appeared under his name, either alone or as co-author, and his plant collections included some eighty taxa new to science, most of which he described and published personally. He was an active participant in the International Botanical Congresses in Europe, and when the first truly international congress was held in North America, bringing many top Eurasian botanists to this country for the first time, his field trips to the Canadian Rocky Mountains and Arctic/sub-Arctic Canada were a triumphant success.

Erling Porsild is remembered in many quarters as a quiet, soft-spoken man who worked best alone, driving himself to complete what he set out to do. His dry sense of humour, along with his gift of story-telling, was notorious. He was a pragmatic rather than a charismatic leader, for he was not interested in inspiring others to great heights, nor did he suffer fools patiently or have the ability to calm troubled situations and he despised the routine work of administration, but he was respected for his wide knowledge of northern affairs, his personal integrity, and his total dedication to his scientific milieu. His many contributions to his chosen country deserve our recognition and appreciation.