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OLAV HELGI LØKEN (1931–2015)

Olav was born on 23 February 1931, in the small coastal town of Ålesund, Norway. After earning his early degrees at the University of Oslo, he worked as a glaciologist at Wilkes Station as a member of the U.S. Antarctic Program during the International Geophysical Year (1957–58). He came to Canada to study for his doctorate at McGill University in September 1958, although he spent his first winter as a meteorological observer at the McGill Sub-Arctic Research Laboratory at Schefferville, central Labrador-Ungava. Here the climate and small staff atmosphere must have appeared not particularly unfamiliar to his experience in Antarctica (in those early days of the Lab we undertook all hourly observations out-of-doors, which even included defrosting the globe on the actinograph before each sunrise with bare hands).

My first acquaintance with Olav resulted from his decision to winter in the Subarctic rather than proceed directly to McGill in Montreal. The 1958–59 winter, under the spectacular Northern Lights (highly relevant to IGY investigations) led to the cementing of a lifelong friendship and many years of research collaboration. In concert with Don Macnab, chief climatologist, who had also spent an Antarctic apprenticeship, Olav, Don, and I were able to introduce three British neophytes to the excitement and rigors of operating a first-order meteorological station for McGill under contract to the federal Department of Transport.

The long cold winter provided Olav with ample time to design and prepare for his doctoral fieldwork the following summer. His chosen field area was the Torngat Mountains, then extremely isolated; his subject, the glacial history and geomorphology of northeastern Labrador-Ungava. He was awarded a research grant from the Arctic Institute of North America and was provided with long-distance pontoon aircraft transport by British Newfoundland Exploration (BRINEX). Olav tempted Arve Fiskerstrand from Norway to join him as field assistant for his first summer. Olav returned to Montreal in September 1959 to continue his doctoral research, supported by a McGill-Carnegie-Arctic Research Scholarship.

There followed several more highly successful summers in the Torngat Mountains. Olav and Inger Marie were married in Montreal on 4 June 1960 and celebrated their honeymoon in the Torngat Mountains. After completing his doctorate at McGill, Olav was recruited as assistant professor by the newly established Department of Geography at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

Olav's career and my own ran a remarkable parallel course in those formative years. Fortunately, in 1964 I was able to tempt him to join me as Chief of the Division of Physical Geography, Geographical Branch, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys in Ottawa. One personal experience is worth relating at this point. During the 1962 annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Geographers held at McMaster University, Olav presented a paper on his research in the Torngat Mountains. I had been asked to offer critique and comments. While agreeing with much of Olav's presentation, on one key point I voiced disagreement. There followed a very vigorous discussion, although no fisticuffs! After he came to Ottawa, one senior geographer expressed his amazement that Olav would join me when assuredly we were confirmed antagonists. This taught me a profound lesson and especially an insight into Olav's approach to life. When I mentioned this conversation to him he replied: "Our arguments are most helpful—isn't that how research progresses? I enjoy them." The McMaster dispute obviously had nothing to do with friendship, but everything to do with collaboration, a not altogether standard academic phenomenon. And so began what was for me, and I am sure for Olav, four fruitful years working together to ensure the success of the Baffin Island expeditions (my forthcoming book on this topic [Ives, in press] is co-dedicated to Olav).

Olav Helgi Løken on his 77th birthday in 2008.

By 1964, the Baffin Island multiyear expedition had expanded to more than 20 members and branched out into plant ecology, hydrology, and Pleistocene stratigraphy. When my deputy minister insisted that, as director of the branch, I must attend the International Geographical Congress in London, Olav, direct from Queen's, became fully responsible for the field operations. He established a new base camp at the head of Inugsuin Fiord and quickly won the confidence of the entire party. He also found time for some important scientific contributions.

In 1965, the introduction of helicopter support greatly increased accessibility, especially to the outer east coast on Baffin Bay and the high mountain summits. It also increased the burden of responsibility, which I was able to share with Olav during the 1965 to 1967 seasons. A personal story provided by our much appreciated helicopter pilot, David Harrison, provides an insight into Olav's pragmatic and confident response to sudden difficulties. David's first "extreme" mission was to take Olav and a student assistant to the outer coast northwest of Clyde River. David relates that:

> 2nd July was a long foggy day…still only my first week in this part of the North. While Olav…picked antique sea shells from the cliffs, [the] helicopter… and I sat around on the beach enveloped in grey mist. Came the end of the day, the three of us got back into the helicopter—tired, hungry and ready to fly back to a warm camp. The engine, by now quite soaked in foggy droplets, had other ideas…the battery was dead. And with it the radio.…Olav stoically but politely dismissed my idea about hiking along the shore to Cape Christian (the U.S. Coast Guard LORAN base many miles south, knowing there were several rivers…that would be very unsafe to cross.…He just pointed 90 degrees out to the vast expanse of sea ice and announced, "No! we'll walk out there and continue on the sea ice—it will be crunchy but we shouldn't fall through." So we crunched along for hours and hours. It was around midnight the following day when we walked, pretty fatigued, into the overheated mess hall and astounded the guys on the base…. It was the morning of the Fourth of July. I am sure we had been stalked by a polar bear for much of the walk. Olav, of course, seemed to take it all totally in his stride.

In Baffin, student assistants and staff alike would remark on Olav's patience, kind assistance as a natural field teacher, and prime example of exceptional leadership in difficult, and sometimes dangerous, circumstances. One repeated comment was on his surreal ability to forge ahead on the Barnes Ice Cap in a blizzard and to repeatedly hit, spot on, snow stakes a kilometre apart.

In 1967, government bureaucracy resulted in the dismemberment of the Geographical Branch. Many of the staff moved away, but Olav chose to stay in Ottawa. He took the position as head of the Glaciology Subdivision in the new Inland Waters Branch of the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources. In this way, he was the main force in preserving a distinct glaciological entity within the federal government that has functioned to the present day. Much of his work focused on projects launched in the context of the International Hydrological Decade (1965–74). He also continued his earlier work along the eastern Canadian Arctic seaboard, particularly on submarine geomorphology.

In 1976, Olav became director of the Northern Environmental Protection Branch, Indian and Northern Affairs, where he directed and coordinated environmental assessments of major development projects, including the Norman Wells Oil Field Expansion and Pipeline Project, the Mackenzie Delta gas projects, and the Beaufort Sea Hydrocarbon Production Proposal. He was also involved in the Arctic Land Use Research Program, investigating rehabilitation of sumps and drilling sites and the effect of motorized vehicles on the tundra surface.

From 1984 to 1989 Olav served as director of the Environmental Studies Research Funds, Indian and Northern Affairs and Energy, Mines and Resources where he was accountable for scientific, administrative, and financial planning. This targeted research program facilitated decision making regarding oil and gas activities in Canada's frontier regions. It was funded by industry and involved extensive contacts with the private sector and with First Nations and Inuit groups.

After retirement from his Government of Canada position, Olav worked with the newly created Canadian Polar Commission to promote Canadian involvement in Antarctic research. Among many activities, he was Secretary of the Canadian Committee on Antarctic Research from its inception in 1998 until 2005. He was instrumental in Canada's application to join the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR). As Canada's representative on SCAR, he was influential in ensuring passage in 2003 of the Antarctic Environmental Protection Act, which was part of the Madrid Protocol.

Other nongovernmental activities have also been significant. For instance, in 2001 Olav served as Observer for the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) on an Antarctic cruise ship.

Olav introduced an implacable sense of correctness, patience, kindly yet firm leadership, to many aspects of life—Canadian government, international institutions, and all walks of civilian life. He was an active member of the Norwegian community in Ottawa and served as President of the Canadian Nordic Society and the Arctic Circle. He loved the outdoors and was a passionate cross-country skier. He enjoyed spending time at the family tree farm near Shawville, tending the forest, doing the interior woodwork for a new house, and building fences and furniture.

Our thoughts are warmly extended to Inger Marie and the family, three sons, daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren. It has been a great privilege for me to count Olav as a friend and colleague for such a large proportion of our lives. His presence will long be remembered.

REFERENCE

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