

## WESTON BLAKE JR. (1930–2021)

With the death in Ottawa on 10 January 2021 of Weston Blake Jr., Arctic Quaternary science lost one of its leading practitioners, an internationally-known figure with more than 50 field seasons in Arctic Canada, Greenland, and Svalbard to his credit.

Wes was born 26 February 1930 in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of Weston Blake Sr. and Helen (née Warbasse). Wes grew up in a family of ardent skiers, and a love of the outdoors was instilled in him early. A taste for the Arctic came later, during undergraduate studies in geology at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire (A.B. 1951). The renowned Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson paid annual visits to Dartmouth, and Wes, in his final year, attended a course in polar geography taught by Trevor Lloyd and David Nutt. Further education on the North followed, at McGill University and on southern Baffin Island where he assisted geomorphologist John Mercer for three months in 1952. At McGill, Wes completed an M.Sc. in forest geography based on fieldwork in Northwest River, Labrador, in 1953. Wes recalled that his office in Montreal was in the attic of Bishop Mountain House, then the Canadian headquarters of the Arctic Institute of North America. In the winter of 1953–54, Wes accompanied David Nutt on a journey by dog team around Lake Melville, Labrador, re-occupying oceanographic stations established during the Blue Dolphin Expeditions.

Military service in the U.S. Army's Transportation Arctic Group from 1953 to 1955 gave Wes the chance, in 1954, to spend five months on the Inland Ice of Greenland east of Thule Air Base, testing a crevasse detector and mapping a safe route for heavy tractor trains through the crevassed marginal areas of the ice sheet. Wes made two further visits to Northwest Greenland in 1956 to carry out glacier flow rate measurements north of Thule. There he worked with a group led by Richard P. Goldthwait, who was to become his Ph.D. thesis supervisor at Ohio State University.

Wes then spent several years in graduate studies in glacial geology and geomorphology, alternating between Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, and the University of Stockholm. Two long field seasons of glacial geological fieldwork in 1957 and 1958 in Nordaustlandet, Svalbard, with the Swedish Glaciological Expedition, under the leadership of Valter Schytt, led to the award of a Ph.D. by Ohio State University in 1962.

In 1962, Wes joined the full-time staff of the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) in Ottawa as a research scientist. He was surficial geologist on regional bedrock mapping projects on Bathurst Island in 1963 and 1964 and southern Baffin Island in 1965. From 1967 on, he focussed his attention on the glacial history of southern and eastern Ellesmere Island and Northwest Greenland, collaborating with scientists from the GSC and elsewhere and making use of research stations established by Fritz Müller of McGill University and ETH (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) Zürich, at Coburg Island, Cape Herschel on Ellesmere Island, and the Carey Islands. Particularly dear to Wes's heart was the Cape



Fig. 1. Wes Blake in a jovial mood on his way to a favourite haunt, Cape Herschel, eastern Ellesmere Island, in 2009 (Photo taken by Alexandra Rouillard).

Herschel project, initiated in 1978 and continuing to this day. It comprises coring of lake and marine sediments to study past climatic, environmental, and oceanographic changes; studying glacier fluctuations and changes in flow directions with time; and investigating land emergence from the sea. This work involves collaboration with, and contributions from numerous researchers in Canada, U.S.A., and Europe, among which John P. Smol and Marianne Douglas figure prominently in recent years. Wes managed to make three further visits with Scandinavian colleagues to Svalbard in 1966, 1990 and 1995.

Land studies were supplemented by participation in cruises by the C.S.S. *Hudson* in northern Baffin Bay and southern Nares Strait in 1974 and 1991. On these cruises, Wes learnt details of sea floor topography over vast areas and acquired cores of marine sediments at selected sites.

The geochronology of the Pleistocene and Holocene of High Arctic Canada was essentially a blank book at the



Fig. 2. Wes at Baird Inlet, eastern Ellesmere Island, 2004 (Photo taken by John Smol).

start of Wes's career; he did much to fill it in. He headed the Paleocology and Geochronology Section in GSC's Terrain Sciences Division from 1969 to 1986 and was instrumental in establishing and maintaining the high standards of the GSC Radiocarbon Laboratory during its lifetime.

Wes retired in 1995 but continued full-time Arctic research (fieldwork included) as an emeritus scientist for many years. Sadly, the last few years of his life were marred by ill health, yet he published a last paper in December 2020.

A major tenet of Wes's scientific legacy was his concept, first broached in 1969, that an Innuitian ice sheet covered much of the Canadian High Arctic during the last glaciation. This proposal met with considerable opposition over the years but is now generally accepted. Several of Wes's publications on the Queen Elizabeth Islands were recognized in the granting of a 'Filosofie doktor' (Ph.D.) degree in physical geography by the University of Stockholm in 1975. Wes had earlier (1964) been awarded a 'Filosofie licentiat' (Licentiate) degree by the same university. In 2001 Wes won the W.A. Johnston Medal of the Canadian Quaternary Association (CANQUA) in recognition of his significant contributions to Arctic Quaternary science, his indefatigable committee work on behalf of CANQUA, and his encouragement, promotion, and mentoring of a host of students and young scientists.

Wes will be remembered not only as an outstanding scientist but also as a gentle, soft spoken man with an enduring passion for the Arctic and a love of things Scandinavian. He was proud of his American roots, as shown by the life-long retention, against the odds in Canada, of the appellation 'Jr.'.

Wes is survived by his wife of 60 years, Ingrid (née Olsson), sons Erik (Sabine) and Sven (Ana Luiza), four grandchildren, and a sister, Joanna Melone.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this obituary I acknowledge the help of Ingrid, Erik, and indeed Wes Blake, and thank Alexandra Rouillard, Marianne Douglas, and John P. Smol for supplying photographs.

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