

In memoriam

Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch, Jr. (1938-2010)

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IN MEMORIAM

Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch, Jr.

(1938-2010)

Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch, Jr., passed away on September 16, 2010, at his home in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. He was 72. His life ended suddenly, at a time when he was still as active as ever during his extremely productive career as an Arctic anthropologist. Indeed, for more than four decades, he has been a towering presence in the community of Inuit studies, and more broadly in the community of anthropologists of the circumpolar North. His primary geographical focus of interest was northwest Alaska, but he also conducted research in West Hudson Bay and had authoritative knowledge about all Inuit, Yup’ik, and neighbouring Indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North.

Ernest S. Burch, Jr., was first called “Tiger” by some of his father’s friends shortly after his birth on April 17, 1938 in New Haven, Connecticut. This is the name by which he was thereafter known and called by family and friends, and later by colleagues as well. He was the eldest of the three children of Ernest Burch, Sr., and Elsie Lillard Burch. Although a city lawyer, Tiger’s father loved the outdoors, and he communicated this passion to his eldest son. In 1954, at age 16, Tiger was accepted as a junior member on one of Donald B. MacMillan's last Arctic expeditions, during which they travelled by schooner to Labrador, Greenland, and northern Baffin Island¹. This experience caused him to shift away from his original intention to become a field biologist, and to study human and social sciences instead. He received a B.A. in sociology, cum laude, from Princeton University in 1960. Immediately afterwards, he was hired to conduct a one-year study of the use of local resources in Kivalina, a small Iñupiaq community in northwest Alaska. He then went on with graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago (M.A. 1963; Ph.D. 1966). During his doctoral studies, he travelled again to Kivalina, accompanied by his wife, with the

¹ My account is based on personal and written communications with the late Tiger Burch, on an earlier and detailed version of his curriculum vitae, on the latest version that was communicated to me by Igor Krupnik, and on Tiger’s own recollections (Burch 2002, 2007c).

intention to spend a year doing research. While there, in December 1964, Tiger was terribly burned in a gasoline fire while trying to save his field notes. He returned to the village after months of treatment but he, who had practised participant observation with such enthusiasm, found himself unable to join in strenuous subsistence activities anymore. Thus, making virtue out of a necessity, he switched to interviewing as his primary field research method; this actually coincided with a change in his orientation, from ethnography to oral history.

From 1966 until he resigned in 1974, Tiger Burch was on the faculty of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. In 1969-70, he conducted what he considered to be his major Alaska research, based with his wife and two very young daughters in Kotzebue. During nine months, he relentlessly interviewed elders considered to be experts in local history, tapping into treasures of knowledge that until then researchers had ignored, and actually even scorned. With the method of historical reconstruction based on oral accounts, which he had devised and perfected, he was able to reconstruct in minute detail many aspects of life, and historical developments, in the whole of northwest Alaska, going back to the first quarter of the 19th century. As a true pioneer, Tiger Burch created social history and historical ethnography based on knowledge that he elicited from the memories of local experts. These Iñupiaq scholars, untrained in academic disciplines, provided knowledge that he was able to collect, understand, analyse, and synthesise in major publications that will remain monuments on the history of the region, as well as landmarks in the theory and methods of ethnohistory. His analyses were based on solid social science theory, mostly referring to the publications of his sociology professor at Princeton University during his bachelor years, Marion J. Levy. A series of seminal articles, on topics as diverse as kin and trade partnership relations, warfare, cosmology, and caribou as a human resource, preceded his first major book, *Eskimo Kinsmen: Changing Family Relationships in Northwest Alaska* (1975a).

During his years in Manitoba, Tiger Burch also initiated research in what became another major field for him, Caribou Inuit history. After having spent the summer of 1968 interviewing elders in Eskimo Point (today Arviat, Nunavut), he was one of the first to scour the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, for evidence to be put in relation with local historical knowledge. There followed a string of articles that remain marvels of keen source criticism, and sound historical reconstruction based on rather scant and indirect evidence. Tiger Burch exposed the lack of historical insight of no less than Kaj Birket-Smith and Knud Rasmussen (who had invented the ethnonym "Caribou Eskimo"), and proved the later theories of archaeologists on the origins of this people to be partly wrong as well. He later co-guest-edited with Inge Kleivan an issue of this journal reappraising "The Work of Knud Rasmussen" (*Études/Inuit/Studies* 12(1-2), 1988), to which he also contributed several articles (Burch 1988c, d, e, j).

This is where my own path started crossing Tiger's. In 1986, while planning research on Caribou Inuit history, I was introduced to him at the Fifth Inuit Studies Conference in Montreal. He told me that he had amassed a great deal of historical documentation on this topic, that he wanted to publish a large book out of it, but that he was prevented from doing so by other commitments. He added that he thought it not

fair for a researcher to keep unpublished documentation for a long time without making it widely available. Although he barely knew me, he therefore proposed to give me access to his documentation, and to discuss my own findings with him. Shortly afterwards, he invited me to his house and left me alone in his basement office for two days, with full access to all of his documentation on topics of common interest. From Tiger I learned this lesson for life: academics need not be secretive and jealous about their data, as some tend to be. Tiger and I developed a very lively exchange of data (including the data I had collected in the field and in the archives) and discussion of results, in an atmosphere of complete mutual trust. He proposed that we co-author a book about Caribou Inuit history, but he had to put aside this project for many years—all we managed was to publish a short reference article together (1999b). At the time of his demise, the project of writing such a book was still high on his priority list.

From 1979 onward, Tiger Burch was affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, as a research associate (an unpaid position). He worked mostly from his home office in Camp Hill, where he kept extensive and meticulously arranged collections of work papers. Contracts and grants allowed him to work on many topics. The main one was an encyclopaedia in several volumes, which he entitled *The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Northwest Alaska*. The first four volumes were published in limited numbers as gray literature, three of which he reworked into major acclaimed books summing up the results of several decades of research: *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska* (1998a), *Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Iñupiaq Eskimos* (2005a), and *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations* (2006).

Tiger, who considered himself to be “primarily a social historian,” recently summed up his career as follows: “I learned how to do oral history research by doing it for ten years, then spent the rest of my career trying to fill in the gaps in my information and to correct all the mistakes I had made” (Burch 2007c: 150). Thus, after 1970, he returned to the field frequently for short periods to verify and correct his data and hypotheses, until his elderly informants, most of whom were by then close friends, passed away to the last one. And indeed, while he did not hesitate to point out inconsistencies in the work of others, he primarily looked for mistakes in his own work, and once he discovered them he made sure to publicise not only the corrections he had made but also the mistakes, so that his followers would not duplicate them (e.g., Burch 1991a, b). His only interest was in getting knowledge right, and he worked with absolute integrity towards that goal, setting himself extremely high standards of research. He welcomed well-founded criticism of his results, and could not understand that some others might not. Tiger actually followed an explicit personal deontological code. For instance, as he had learned the value of unedited field notes from other researchers as historical sources, he kept his own notes in good order, and willed them early to an institution where they would be made public after his demise; he also encouraged his colleagues to consider doing the same.

Tiger’s publications are a witness to the extremely broad scope of his interests and expertise. He wrote with equal mastery about geology, history of animal populations, hunting and subsistence, kinship, interethnic relations, worldview and religion, and

more. He was also adept at “bracketing” (as he used to say) between very specialised topics and broader issues. Among the latter, he contributed a notable map of the “Peoples of the Arctic ca. 1825,” published in *National Geographic* (Burch 1983b), and a reference volume on *The Eskimos* (Burch 1988a).

Although, and perhaps also partly because, since he left his teaching position at the University of Manitoba in 1974, he was not in daily face-to-face contact with colleagues or students, Tiger had a deep interest in advances in northern anthropology, and in the community of academics to which he belonged. He published several overviews of recent research and reflections on the history of northern ethnography. At the first International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences, in 1992 in Quebec City, he presented, as a keynote address, a very thorough review of “The Organization of Arctic Social Sciences” (1993); this effort was followed by the first ever *International Directory of Arctic Social Scientists* (1997). Tiger participated regularly in international academic meetings, such as the Inuit Studies Conferences, the International Congresses of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS), the Conferences on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS), and so forth. He could be met at about every annual meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association—which honoured him with its Professional Achievement Award in 2003. He thoroughly enjoyed socialising and discussing research issues with colleagues; he took students and junior colleagues as seriously as the most established ones, and made time to discuss their research, and provide advice—which often came in the form of asking the right questions.

Tiger sat on the editorial board of *Études/Inuit/Studies* from 1978 to 1995; he guest-edited two major special issues of this journal, and contributed numerous articles. He also served on several high-level national and international committees, such as the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, the United States Man and the Biosphere Program, the High Latitude Ecosystems Directorate, the Polar Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council, and the Committee on Polar Social Sciences, Polar Research Board, National Research Council. In the late 1970s, he was a participant in several joint USA-USSR symposia on the *Peopling of the New World*.

He was among the founding members of the International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA) in 1990. Thereafter, he regularly renewed his membership until, in 2008, he was awarded one of the first three IASSA honorary lifetime memberships at its fifth congress, in Nuuk, Greenland. Igor Krupnik, then a councillor, and I as then president of IASSA, were more than pleased to have managed to make this happen, with the support of the rest of the council, but we were far from even entertaining the thought that this might be the last occasion to bestow this distinction on him. As for Tiger, he was delighted to see Greenland again, on the year of his 70th birthday, 54 years after his only other visit there. While at the congress, Tiger insisted on receiving the per diem that was part of the deal. But on the day of his departure, he gave it all to the team of Greenlandic students who had helped organise the conference, as a token of gratitude. To those of us who knew him over the years, this came as yet another example of his gracious and generous personal manner.

Tiger Burch is survived by his wife of 47 years, Deanne Burch; his mother, Elsie Burch; his junior brother John Burch; his two daughters, Karen and Sarah, and son David, and their families, including six grandchildren. Among our community of Inuit studies and Arctic anthropology scholars, his memory will be cherished and his legacy will live on.

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Several scholarly events are planned to honour Tiger's memory: among others, a session at the Alaska Anthropological Association annual meeting in Fairbanks, in March 2011, and a session at the upcoming seventh International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS VII) in June 2011, in Akureyri, Iceland. One may also expect special publications from these events.



Figure 1. Ernest S. "Tiger" Burch, Jr., in Nuuk, Greenland, August 2008. Photo by Igor Krupnik.

Appendix: Selected publications by Ernest S. Burch, Jr.²

Books, special volumes, edited collections

BURCH, Ernest S., Jr.

- 1975a *Eskimo Kinsmen: Changing Family Relationships in Northwest Alaska*, Saint Paul, West Publishing Company, American Ethnological Society Monograph, 59.
- 1981a *The Traditional Eskimo Hunters of Point Hope, Alaska: 1800-1875*, Barrow, The North Slope Borough.
- 1984a Editor, The Central Yupik Eskimos, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 8, Supplemental Issue.
- 1988a *The Eskimos*, with photographs by Werner Forman, London, Macdonald and Co. Ltd./Norman, University of Oklahoma Press (German edition 1998; Norwegian edition 1990; Japanese edition 1991; Finnish edition 2000).
- 1988b Co-editor (with Inge Kleivan) of l'Œuvre de Knud Rasmussen / The Work of Knud Rasmussen, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 12(1-2).
- 1994a Co-editor (with Linda J. Ellanna) of *Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research*, Providence, Berg Publishers.
- 1998a *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.
- 2005a *Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Iñupiaq Eskimos*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, Calgary, University of Calgary Press and the Arctic Institute of North America, Northern Lights Series, 7.
- 2006 *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.
- n.d. Caribou Herds of Northwestern Alaska, major new book in preparation (2002–2010)

Major articles, chapters

- 1970a The Eskimo Trading Partnership in North Alaska: A Study in "Balanced Reciprocity", *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, 15(1): 48-80.

² Courtesy of Igor Krupnik; this is a slightly amended version of the list he recently compiled.

- 1970b Marriage and Divorce Among the North Alaskan Eskimos, in Paul Bohannon (ed.), *Divorce and After*, Garden City, Doubleday and Co.: 152-181.
- 1971 The Nonempirical Environment of the Arctic Alaskan Eskimos, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 27(2):148-165.
- 1972a (with Thomas C. Correll) Alliance and Conflict: Inter-Regional Relations in North Alaska, in D.L. Guemple (ed.), *Alliance in Eskimo Society, Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, 1971, Supplement*, Seattle, University of Washington Press: 17-39.
- 1972b The Caribou/Wild Reindeer as a Human Resource, *American Antiquity*, 37(3): 339-368.
- 1974 Eskimo Warfare in Northwest Alaska, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, 16(2): 1-14.
- 1975b Inter-Regional Transportation in Traditional Northwest Alaska, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, 17(2): 1-11.
- 1976 The "Nunamiut" Concept and the Standardization of Error, in Edwin S. Hall, Jr. (ed.), *Contributions to Anthropology: The Interior Peoples of Northern Alaska*, Ottawa, National Museum of Man, Archaeological Survey of Canada, 49: 52-97.
- 1977 Muskox and Man in the Central Canadian Subarctic, 1689-1974, *Arctic*, 30(3): 135-154.
- 1978 Caribou Eskimo Origins: An Old Problem Reconsidered, *Arctic Anthropology*, 15(1): 1-35.
- 1979a (with James G.E. Smith) Chipewyan and Inuit in the Central Canadian Subarctic, 1613-1977, in James G.E. Smith (ed.), *Indian-Eskimo Relations: Studies in the Inter-Ethnic Relations of Small Societies*, *Arctic Anthropology*, 16(2): 76-101.
- 1979b The Ethnography of Northern North America: A Guide to Recent Research, *Arctic Anthropology*, 16(1): 62-146.
- 1979c Indians and Eskimos in North Alaska, 1816-1977: A Study in Changing Ethnic Relations, *Arctic Anthropology*, 16(2): 123-151.
- 1979d Native Claims in Alaska: An Overview, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 3(1): 7-30.
- 1979e The Thule-Historic Eskimo Transition on the West Coast of Hudson Bay, in Allen P. McCartney (ed.), *Thule Eskimo Culture: An Anthropological*

- Retrospective*, Ottawa, National Museum of Man, Archaeological Survey of Canada, 88: 189-211.
- 1980a Traditional Eskimo Societies in Northwest Alaska, *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 4: 253-304.
- 1983a Sociodemographic Correlates of House Structures in Three Beringian Populations: An Exploratory Study, in Henry N. Michael and James W. VanStone (eds.), *Cultures of the Bering Sea Region: Papers from an International Symposium*, New York, International Research and Exchanges Board: 112-139.
- 1984b The Central Yupik Eskimos: An Introduction, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 8, Supplemental Issue: 3-19.
- 1984c Kotzebue Sound Eskimo, in David Damas (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 5, Arctic*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution: 303-319.
- 1984d The Land Claims Era in Alaska, in David Damas (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians, volume 5, Arctic*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution: 657-661.
- 1986a The Eskaleuts—A Regional Overview, in R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (eds), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart: 98-106.
- 1986b The Caribou Inuit, in R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (eds), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart: 106-133.
- 1988c (with Inge Kleivan) The Work of Knud Rasmussen Among the Inuit: An Introduction, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 12(1-2): 5-10.
- 1988d Knud Rasmussen and the "Original" Inland Eskimos of Southern Keewatin, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 12(1-2): 81-100.
- 1988e The End of the Trail: The Work of the Fifth Thule Expedition in Alaska, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 12(1-2): 151-170.
- 1988f Marriage and Divorce Among the North Alaskan Eskimos, reprint of 1970 article in Paul Bohannon (ed.), *Divorce and After*, in J.B. Cole (ed.), *Anthropology for the Nineties: Introductory Readings*, New York, The Free Press: 155-181.

- 1988g Modes of Exchange in Northwest Alaska, in Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (eds), *Hunters and Gatherers 2: Property, Power and Ideology*, New York, Berg Publishers Ltd.: 95-109.
- 1988h Toward a Sociology of the Prehistoric Inupiat: Problems and Prospects, in Robert D. Shaw, Roger K. Harritt and Don E. Dumond (eds), *The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People*, Anchorage, Alaska Anthropological Association, Aurora Monograph, 4: 1-16.
- 1988i War and Trade, in William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell (eds), *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution: 227-240.
- 1991a From Skeptic to Believer: The Making of an Oral Historian, *Alaska History*, 6(1): 1-16.
- 1991b Herd Following Reconsidered, *Current Anthropology*, 32(4): 439-445.
- 1992a (with Thomas C. Brown) Estimating the Economic Value of Subsistence Harvest of Wildlife in Alaska, in George L. Peterson, Cindy S. Swanson, Daniel W. McCollum, and Michael H. Thomas (eds), *Valuing Wildlife Resources in Alaska*, Boulder, Westview Press: 203-254.
- 1993 The Organization of Arctic Social Sciences, in Louis-Jacques Dorais and Ludger Müller-Wille (eds), *Social Sciences in the North: Keynotes Presented at the Eighth Inuit Studies Conference and the First International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences*, Ste-Foy, International Arctic Social Sciences Association and Groupe d'Études Inuit et Circumpolaires, Topics in Arctic Social Sciences, 1: 31-114.
- 1994b The Future of Hunter-Gatherer Research, in Ernest S. Burch, Jr. and Linda J. Ellanna (eds), *Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research*, Providence, Berg Publishers: 441-455.
- 1994c Rationality and Resource Use Among Hunters, in Takashi Irimoto and Takako Yamada (eds), *Circumpolar Religion and Ecology: An Anthropology of the North*, Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press: 163-185.
- 1994d The Inupiat and the Christianization of Arctic Alaska, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 18(1-2): 81-108.
- 1995a (with Craig Mishler) The Di'haii Gwich'in: Mystery People of Northern Alaska, *Arctic Anthropology*, 32(1): 147-172.
- 1995b The Caribou Inuit, in R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (eds.), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, 2nd ed., Toronto, Oxford University Press: 115-142.

- 1998b Boundaries and borders in early contact north-central Alaska, *Arctic Anthropology*, 35(2): 19-48.
- 1998c The North Alaskan Eskimos: A Changing Way of Life, in Melvin Ember, Carol Ember, and David Levinson (eds), *Portraits of Culture: Ethnographic Originals*, vol. I, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall: 89-118.
- 1999a (with Eliza Jones, Hannah P. Loon, and Lawrence Kaplan) The Ethnogenesis of the Kuuvaum Kaniagmiut, *Ethnohistory*, 46(2): 291-327.
- 1999b The Caribou Inuit (with Yvon Csonka), in Richard B. Lee and Richard H. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 56-60.
- 2002 The history of Arctic ethnography: Some personal reflections, in William W. Fitzhugh, Stephen Loring, and Daniel Odess (eds), *Honoring Our Elders: A History of Eastern Arctic Archaeology*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Arctic Studies Center, Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology, 2: 33-46.
- 2005b Sociocultural Anthropology in Alaska, 1972-2002: An Overview, *Alaska Journal of Anthropology*, 3(1): 9-103.
- 2007a Rationality and Resource Use Among Hunters: Some Eskimo Examples (revised version of 1994 paper), in Michael Harkin and David Rich Lewis (eds), *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press. pp. 123-152.
- 2007b Traditional Native Warfare in Western Alaska, in Richard Chacon, and Ruben Mendoza (eds), *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press: 11-29.
- 2009 Smithsonian Contributions to Alaskan Ethnography: The First IPY Expedition to Barrow, 1881-1883, in Igor Krupnik, Michael Lang, and Scott Miller (eds), *Smithsonian at the Poles. Contributions to International Polar Year Science*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press: 89-98.

Special papers, reports, miscellaneous

- 1983b *Peoples of the Arctic (ca. 1825)*, map compiled for the National Geographic Society, Washington.
- 1985 *Subsistence Production in Kivalina, Alaska: A Twenty-Year Perspective*, Juneau, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, Technical Paper, 128 (online at: <http://www.subsistence.adfg.state.ak.us/TechPap/tp128.pdf>).

- 1988j (with Inge Kleivan, Rolf Gilberg, and Jean-Loup Rousselot) Selected Works by Knud Rasmussen, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 12(1-2): 205-221.
- 1990 *The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Northwest Alaska, vol. I, Geology*, Kotzebue, NANA Museum of the Arctic.
- 1994e *The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Northwest Alaska, vol. 5, The Iñupiaq Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Kotzebue, NANA Museum of the Arctic and the U.S. National Park Service.
- 1997 International Directory of Arctic Social Scientists, Washington, National Science Foundation, Office of Polar Programs (NSF 97-94).
- 2007c (interview with Rachel Mason) An Interview with Ernest S. Burch, Jr., *Alaska Journal of Anthropology*, 5(1): 147-153.