

Robert Williamson (1931-2012)

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IN MEMORIAM

Robert Williamson

(1931-2012)

Born in England in 1931, at the age of 21 Bobby Williamson set foot in North America for the first time. After a brief stint working for the federal government, he headed north and became the purser on a small cargo steamer sailing from Great Slave Lake to the Beaufort Sea. Then followed his first anthropological experience, recording Dene folklore in Fort Simpson.

Finally, in 1953, he arrived in the Eastern Arctic, for a stint as a volunteer construction worker at the mission in Pangnirtung. There was no evidence in later life that he had acquired much handyman skill there (Inuktitut yes, but joinery no). By the end of several months of extensive travel and intensive study, he was finally committed to his lifelong passion: Inuit culture and language, especially during this time of transition. In the next two decades, he earned a degree in anthropology from Carleton University and a doctorate from Uppsala University, Sweden.

He had a brief career as a northern bureaucrat, but that profession was like a straitjacket to him. He was not comfortable with bureaucracy, and bureaucrats were not comfortable with him. To the relief and benefit of all parties, he eventually escaped to the University of Saskatchewan. There he established a pattern that he followed for years. His winter base was Saskatoon. His summer base was Rankin Inlet. He, his wife Jean, and their four children (two of whom were northerners adopted into the family) would perform the exhausting migration twice a year. Eventually Bobby and Jean parted ways. Jean continued her life in the North as a teacher and school principal, eventually retiring a few years ago to Saskatchewan. Bobby married Karla Jensen, a Greenlander who is now an anthropological authority in her own right. They had two children together, both of whom are now multilingual residents of Iqaluit. Bobby and Karla raised six children together, as well as helping raise seven grandchildren. During 33 years of marriage, Bobby and Karla also lived in Greenland, northern Sweden, Calgary, and Ottawa, eventually returning to Saskatoon.

Bobby always worked hard. There are 20 dense pages of his publications and activities, here in Canada and in Scandinavia. His name crops up again and again as an authority on Arctic issues. He was, for example, the Arctic tutor to Prince Charles on one of the latter's Canadian tours. There is a story from one of the Royal visits that nicely highlights Bobby's interest in the acculturation of even the most traditional Inuit. The Royal personage had been given a tour by dog-team and, as is his wont, was graciously questioning the unilingual driver. "That's a fine animal," he said, pointing to the leader. "Ask him its name." So Bobby asked "*taingna qimmiq, qanurli atiqarmat?*" The response was, "*Qimmiruna Snoopymik atilik.*"

In 1985 his contributions to our knowledge of the Arctic, and his service as an elected member of the Northwest Territories legislature gained him the Order of Canada. But there was more to him than that. His most attractive trait was the support he gave to students and other young people, particularly the Kusugaq brothers from Rankin Inlet. Michael is now a well-known author of children's stories set in the Arctic. Jose, whom we lost last year, was one of the most charismatic Inuit political leaders. Both men had the qualities to succeed. Both have acknowledged the value of Bobby's support.

I would like to finish by going back 40 some years to a time when I think Bobby was professionally most content. Southern Canadian universities have always felt a romantic, if not always practical, attraction to the Arctic. Bobby's force of personality was such that he managed to persuade the University of Saskatchewan to set up the Arctic Research and Training Centre (ARTC) in Rankin Inlet. The ARTC was a set of Alberta Trailer Co. units that provided accommodation, classroom, and kitchen facilities. This is where he and I renewed our relationship (Bobby had been one of my first Inuktitut teachers in Ottawa in 1959). I was in charge of the newly created Eskimo Language School, which was homeless. We ended up for four years in a symbiotic relationship with the ARTC. Bob taught summer courses; we taught winter courses. There were nine or ten weeks of overlap each year, and Bob and I got to know each other quite well.

Bobby was committed, enthusiastic, caring, flamboyant... and occasionally exasperating. Bobby loved an audience, and our old two-way radio system provided one. Any radio conversation had an attendant audience, hoping for drama. Here is a brief exchange with an airline manager I shall call Mr. Collins to save him embarrassment. "Mr. Collins, Mr. Collins, all I ever hear from you are lies, I repeat LIES! I spell Lima India Echo Sierra LIES! How do you copy? Over... Mr. Collins, how do you read?" I have been waiting 40 years to use those lines, preferably at a crowded political meeting. A few years later Bobby and I gave a joint briefing to a group of senior CBC executives meeting in Yellowknife. I set the scene carefully. Bobby's segment was "Culture and Language," mine was "Language and Culture." He wore corduroy, I wore Donegal tweed. I could rely on him to do the Professor Higgins role; I revived my Belfast accent. I thought it was a magnificent performance, but we were never invited to repeat it.

He dealt with Parkinson's as if it were some rules and desk-bound bureaucrat that he could defeat by ignoring it. He never surrendered but anthropology is a much less colourful performance now.

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