

### The Reindeer Botanist: Alf Erling Porsild, 1901–1977

By Wendy Dathan. 2012. University of Calgary Press, 2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, AB, Canada, T2N 1N4. 726 pages, 44.95 CAD, Paper.

Erling Porsild is a legendary figure in Canadian botany. His personal accomplishments as an explorer, taxonomist and biogeographer have rightly earned him a place of honour in Canadian science. More than that, his career crossed an important transition in floristic research. When he arrived in this country, vast swaths of the boreal and arctic regions of Canada had never been visited by biologists. By the end of his career, he had personally documented the flora of large parts of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and the Hudson Bay Lowlands, and the number of places in Canada's far north that remained unknown to science was shrinking fast.

Wendy Dathan has done an admirable job in compiling Porsild's biography. This is a fantastically detailed treatment. She starts at the beginning, which for Porsild was Greenland. He truly was born into the life of an Arctic botanist, moving to the island of Disko off the west coast of Greenland when he was five. His father, an accomplished botanist himself, had the job of establishing a permanent research station in the Danish colony.

The elder Porsild had some sway with Canadian botanists, and later helped land Erling and his brother Bob jobs doing survey work in the Yukon. This was in support of government plans to establish domestic reindeer herds to support the Inuit communities of the Yukon and Northwest Territories – and the source of the book's title. Dathan's presentation of this period presents one of the highlights of the book. The Porsild brothers spent several years in the northwest. They travelled across the North Slope of Alaska by dog sled in the dead of winter, followed by further adventures in boats, canoes and on foot. This would make for gripping reading as a simple tale of adventure travel. But of course, in addition to all the work involved in living a mostly self-sufficient life in the often brutal Arctic, the two brothers dutifully collected and pressed specimens throughout their journeys.

This work established Erling in Canadian botany. However, it would be many years before he finally secured a permanent position with the National Museum. He eventually became the Chief Botanist for the institution, but only after years in short-term or acting positions.

All the while, he continued to pursue his scientific work. Through Porsild's struggles to have his work published, Dathan explores his relationships with his contemporaries, including Oscar Malte, Hugh Raup, Merritt Fernald, and especially the Swedish botanist Eric Hultén. Hultén and Porsild were both working on northern floristics, and for years Porsild saw the Swede as a competitor. Many years later they reached a reconciliation of sorts, with Porsild realizing that both of their work had suffered from lack of cooperation. This was a very compelling story, and another highlight of the book for me.

For those of us that grew up with Farley Mowat's stories, the chapter covering the heated dispute over Mowat's contentious book, "People of the Deer" is also very interesting. Porsild, along with many other Arctic researchers, found Mowat's claim that his book was a factual retelling of actual events too fantastic to believe. Unfortunately for Porsild, he put his objections in print. The ensuing dust-up consumed far more time and energy than Porsild would have liked, particularly for a book he felt had such little merit.

Dathan's book is a truly monumental effort, and a great service to the botanical community of Canada. Indeed, she has received awards from the Alberta Book Awards and the Canadian Historical Association. Her writing is clear and understated – she provides very little commentary of her own. Instead, as far as possible, she lets Erling tell his own story, with extensive quotations from his correspondence. For the most part, this is very effective.

That said, I do have to take issue with one aspect of her work – at 726 pages, I frequently wished she'd been

more willing to omit the less interesting details of Porsild's life. Every time a boat engine broke, or a trip was delayed, we read about it, and in far more detail than necessary. A few of these embellishments add colour to the story. But after 500 pages, a little restraint would have been appreciated!

In summary, I can highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of exploration in Cana-

da. As a plant taxonomist, I found it provided a fantastic, and at times jaw-dropping, look at the challenges and triumphs of one of our scientific forebears. And of course, this should be required reading for Canadian botanists!

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