

BOOK REVIEW

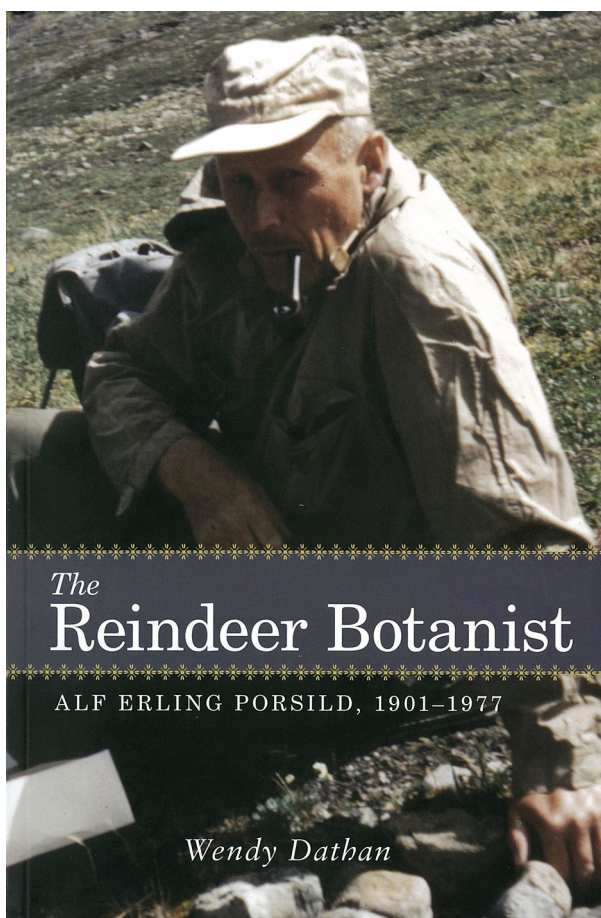
Review of *The reindeer botanist: Alf Erling Porsild, 1901–1977*, by Wendy Dathan (2012). Calgary: University of Calgary Press. 726 pp. ISBN 978-1-55238-586-9.

For anyone who might imagine that the life of a 20th century botanist could have been anything other than an amiable and peaceful pursuit of floral diversity this biography will come as a revelation. Alf Erling Porsild (he preferred to be called Erling) was brought up in Greenland at Godhavn (69°N), where his father, a botanist and a graduate in natural history from the University of Copenhagen was the director of the first permanent research station to be situated north of the Arctic Circle. It is not surprising that such an entry into Arctic life, its rigours and challenges, together with a botanist for a parent, created a character uniquely adapted to biological exploration of remote parts of the Arctic. Wendy Dathan has written a meticulous and engrossing account of just how the life of arguably the most outstanding explorer and pioneer of Canadian Arctic botany developed from childhood in Greenland to become a botanist of international renown and lasting fame.

In his formative years, Erling was immersed in both the physical and the cultural life of the native Greenlanders. The physical life of driving dog-sledges, shooting ptarmigan, fishing, coping with the long winters, snow storms, and the all-pervading ice, gave him the skills to travel and live off the land that set him apart from most other 20th century European and North American Arctic botanical explorers. Equally remarkable, Erling's educational background included not just the culture and language of his Danish parents but also that of the native Greenlanders, including mastering their language. Dathan also makes us aware of a man with boundless energy and determination to successfully accomplish whatever tasks he has been given. One of his most astonishing feats was reconnoitring, organizing and supervising the driving of a vast herd of thousands of reindeer from Alaska to the Canadian Northwest Territories, and setting up a reindeer station in order to alleviate hunger among the native peoples. This was a gargantuan project. It was both dangerous and physically daunting, given the nature of the terrain and the vicissitudes of life in winter, not to mention the clouds

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of mosquitos that affected both the animals and their herders in summer. Dathan's meticulous attention to detail in examining not just Erling's diaries, but all government reports on the enterprise, vividly recreates these events. The background to the whole question of the problems of reindeer herding in North America as opposed to Scandinavia and Siberia is examined and also traced back to previous attempts. One example is that of Wilfred Grenfell and his unsuccessful attempt to introduce 300 Norwegian reindeer to St Anthony, Newfoundland, in order to alleviate the high incidence of tuberculosis and infant mortality.

The biography traces Erling's early struggles to establish himself as a professional botanist without having the credentials of a university degree. As a result of this perceived deficiency, he endured an unending series of temporary employments, with no increase in salary for over 16 years, even though his exceptional botanical abilities and profound local knowledge were generally

recognized. It was just this knowledge of Greenland and its people that led to Erling becoming a wartime diplomat, serving in a consular capacity in Greenland when the German occupation of Denmark had cut off communications with the national government. For someone who was not schooled in conventional diplomacy, this was no easy undertaking. Here again, Dathan has been meticulous in her searches through endless administrative memoranda, notes and reports to describe the international problems and frustrations with which Erling had to contend with being an amateur diplomat. Botanically, his quest for recognition and permanent employment was eventually rewarded, which also enabled him to develop Canada's National Herbarium, of which he had become curator in 1936 and turned it into an institution worthy of Canada's enormous natural heritage.

The biography also records how Erling introduced a new word into the English language. *Pingo* is an Inuit word now used generally to describe ice-cored mounds in regions of discontinuous permafrost (*hydrolaccoliths*). Having been brought up in Greenland, he was already familiar with these features that he described as *mud-volcanoes*. In his crossing of the Mackenzie River in 1927,

he noted them in his diary as *pingos*, marking this as the first recorded written use of this Greenland Inuit word. Subsequently he introduced the word *pingo* into the English language in his botanical writings.

From this stage of Erling's life, the biography pursues innumerable letters and diaries that not only give us an image of Erling's own botanical achievements but also provide a glimpse of the many notable contributors to Arctic biology that were his contemporaries. Such personalities include Hugh M. Raup, Eric Hultén, Nicholas Polunin, V.C. Wynne Edwards and many others. All come to life in these pages with their personalities, deeds and words briefly revived.

The book is well illustrated with photographs together with maps. The sometimes rather dusky images of personalities have a special charm as the characters seem to emerge from the shadows of the past to remind us briefly of their former existence. There is also an appendix where footnotes are arranged chapter-by-chapter, followed by a subject index. In all, this is an incomparable account, a biographical achievement of the highest order, and a worthy tribute to a very remarkable man and a truly great botanist whose humanity lives on in these skilfully written pages.