



Dewey Soper in skin clothing, Amadjuac Bay, Baffin Island, 1926. This is the photograph which Jim Kilabuk recognized as being that of "my friend Soper".

### JOSEPH DEWEY SOPER

1893 — 1982

In 1960 the University of Alberta conferred on Dewey Soper the degree of Doctor of Laws, *Honoris Causa*. The presentation, by Dr. Ralph Nursall, concluded with the words: "Dewey Soper is a man of action and acuity, in a particular sense *l'homme engagé*, second to none as a pioneer of the North whose courage, industry and initiative inspire us to find our country and extend all its benefits into our lives."

Those well-chosen words stand today as an epitaphic tribute to a man who spent the early years of his career in arctic exploration and a lifetime in the study of natural history and in pursuit of scientific knowledge.

Initially, however, Dewey Soper was a disappointment to both of his parents. He rejected his mother's desire that he enter the ministry, and the wishes of his father that he remain on their Ontario farm. He spurned organized religion and became a true disciple of nature. He marvelled at the complexities of creation and evolution, and at the Supreme guidance in creating the perfect order of the universe. In philosophical

terms he was influenced by Thoreau's *Walden*, and in a practical sense motivated by the writings of Ernest Thompson Seton. The love of nature transcended most other areas of his life — he was an outdoorsman first and his vocations and avocations stemmed from this prerequisite.

In 1911 the Soper family moved to Edmonton. For Dewey, the twelve years that followed were devoted to the seeking of knowledge — intermittent semesters at Alberta College and at the University of Alberta where he studied zoology; periods of work as a carpenter and trapper to meet the financial demands of formal education; personal wildlife investigations in ornithology and mammalogy. In 1920 he met Dr. R.M. Anderson of the National Museums of Canada, and the friendship that resulted became the pivotal point in Soper's life. In 1923 Dr. Anderson appointed him naturalist on the expedition of the C.G.S. *Arctic* to Labrador, Greenland, and Baffin, Devon, Beechey, Bylot and Ellesmere islands. Soper's Great Arctic Adventure had begun.

In the context of his lifespan, arctic explorations occupied a small segment of his 89 years, yet they left an indelible imprint on his life and in his own mind forever stood as the pinnacle of his achievements. His three expeditions were conducted in 1923, 1924-26 and 1928-31. The latter two took him to southern Baffin Island and comprised eleven separate journeys of exploration. Although considerable exploratory and scientific work had taken place there by the early 1920s, many surveys were inaccurate and vast areas remained unexplored. It was on these latter regions that he focused his attention. From his principal base camps at Pangnirtung, Cape Dorchester, Cape Dorset and Lake Harbour, he and his Inuit assistants journeyed by dogsled in winter and by freighter canoe in summer. Soper explored and track-surveyed unknown coasts as well as rivers, lakes and other features of the interior, and undertook wildlife investigations and the collection of zoological and botanical specimens. Viewed in perspective — considering the lack of modern equipment and the unsophisticated means of communication and travel — those ventures into the interior and across Baffin Island were remarkable conquests. Only the German explorer Hantzsch had crossed the island prior to Soper, but Hantzsch had succumbed to fever and starvation before he could make the return trip. Soper's successful crossing and return in January-February, 1926, covered 1050 kilometres. His courage and determination are reflected in two sentences from his own writings: "I still feel extraordinary admiration for the splendid efforts of Akatuga and Newkequak who endured so much fatigue and suffering without a murmur, and what seemed the incredible hardship for the dogs. It is impossible to forget the frightful cold of 70° below zero as we forged our way over the frozen Lake Nettilling and across the Great Plain of the Koukjuak to Foxe Basin and back to the east coast."

In 1929, newspapers published accounts of J.D. Soper and his successful six-year, 30 000-mile search for the nesting grounds of the blue goose. Even Ripley's *Believe-it-or-Not* featured the "Wild Goose Chase", and for years afterwards he endured the nickname "Blue Goose Soper". Although the

duration-distance aspect was reported slightly out of context, the story was true. The location of the nesting grounds of the blue goose had been a mystery to naturalists, and from the beginning of his expeditions in 1923, Soper had hoped to solve it. In 1926 he met an Inuk hunter on the Tikkuut Islands (off the south shores of Baffin) who claimed that he knew the exact area where *kungovik* nested. Later another Inuk at Cape Dorset corroborated the story: the location was Bowman Bay on the west coast. In the spring of 1929 Soper was there waiting. In early June the geese arrived by the thousands — the search was over.

In 1927, between expeditions, Soper visited his sister in Wetaskiwin, Alberta. There he met and married a young nurse, Carolyn Freeman. Carrie was to become his companion on many wilderness trails and his partner in a marriage that spanned more than 55 years. When he returned to Baffin Island in 1930, this time to Lake Harbour, he took with him his wife and their young son Roland. The family lived temporarily at the Hudson's Bay Company post while Soper built a house, which is still in use half a century later. Carrie Soper was the first graduate nurse in the Eastern Arctic, and as there were no resident doctors in the area, she took on the responsibility of attending to scores of cases, some of which were serious in nature. Though the Sopers returned to civilization the following summer, Dewey is still remembered by elderly Inuit in Lake Harbour. The lasting impression he created is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that when a picture of Dewey, taken in the late 1920s, was shown in 1980 to his former travelling companion Jim Kilabuk of Pangnirtung, Kilabuk immediately recognized the figure in the photo as that of "my friend Soper" — though the two had lost contact with one another during the intervening fifty years.

Assignments that followed his return to the "south" included a two-year wildlife survey of Wood Buffalo Park (1932-34); appointment as Chief Federal Wildlife Officer for the Prairie Provinces, Canadian Wildlife Service, Winnipeg (1934-48); and a transfer to Edmonton as Chief Federal Wildlife Officer for Alberta, Yukon and Northwest Territories (1948-52). The latter appointment provided Soper with the opportunity to undertake wildlife surveys in the Yukon and Western Arctic, near the end of his government career. He disliked offices and grew frustrated with the ever-increasing paperwork that flooded his one-man office and kept him from his field studies. He opted for early retirement at age 59 so that he could continue with field work and writing without interference from Ottawa.

Reporting of scientific results is important, and Soper was a prolific writer. His bibliography reveals that he was first published at age 20 ("The Least Flycatcher", *Family Herald and Weekly Star*) and two more articles followed the same year. From then until he was in his late seventies a steady stream of words flowed from his pen — over 130 research papers, monographs and general-interest articles appeared in a variety of publications. In addition, he authored the definitive *Mammals of Alberta* (Alberta Government, 1964), *The Mammals of Jasper National Park* (Canadian Wildlife Service,

1969), and a book based on his arctic journals, *Canadian Arctic Recollections* (Institute for Northern Studies, University of Saskatchewan, 1981).

Although a modest man (he usually avoided publicity, particularly when in government service), he appreciated recognition of his work. He was delighted when the Government of Canada established the Dewey Soper Bird Sanctuary on Baffin Island in 1957. This 8100-km<sup>2</sup> sanctuary is located near Bowman Bay, where 28 years before he had patiently awaited the arrival of the blue geese. His contribution to the exploration of Baffin Island was further recognized by the Canadian Committee on Geographic Names in the naming of Soper River and Soper Lake (near Lake Harbour) and Soper Highlands (near the northwest shore of Nettilling Lake). In 1978 he received the N.W.T. Commissioner's Award in recognition of his contribution to the Northwest Territories in the fields of science and exploration, and in 1980 the Douglas H. Pimlott Conservation Award was presented to him by the Canadian Nature Federation. He was a Fellow of The Arctic Institute of North America, a charter member of the American Society of Mammalogists, and a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union.

In the years that followed his official retirement he continued to do field work, usually alone and in remote wilderness camps. He was appointed an Honorary Research Associate in Zoology at the University of Alberta, and contributed to the department's study collection of birds and mammals. During his lifetime he collected over 10 000 scientific specimens, the majority of which are deposited in the National Museums of Canada, the Manitoba Provincial Museum and the University of Alberta. In the course of his work he discovered several subspecies of birds and mammals; some bear the name *soperi*.

It could be said that Dewey Soper's entire life was a voyage of discovery. Little of his time was wasted. His hobbies were few and related to his work. He enjoyed sketching and water-colour painting, and much of his art was used to illustrate his writing. After his retirement he occasionally sport-hunted for upland game birds, but the skins of quarry acquired were carefully preserved as study specimens for the university. He was a robust man and appeared that way even in later life. His face tanned easily from years of outdoor living, and contrasted sharply with his shock of white hair. His hunting companions, usually much younger than he, marvelled at his stamina and enthusiasm — not just for the hunt, but for being with good companions in his beloved outdoors. One quality that set him apart from so many of his peers was that he retained his boyish enthusiasm for the natural world to the end of his life. He only hung up his boots and binoculars for good when failing health forced him into hospital.

Dr. J. Dewey Soper died in Edmonton on 2 November 1982. He is survived by his wife, a daughter, a son and daughter-in-law and five grandchildren. His print was left not only on arctic snows but also upon the memories of all those whom he met during his sojourn on earth. He will be missed, but not forgotten.

Roland Soper and Tom Beck