

ERNEST S. (TIGER) BURCH, Jr. (1938–2010)

Whatever I might have to say about what a tremendous researcher and person [Tiger] was would only echo what others have to say. He was the best: thoughtful, generous with his data, and a role model to be emulated.
(G. Spearman, pers. comm. 2010)

On 16 September 2010, the field of northern anthropology lost its most renowned ethnologist with the unexpected passing of Ernest S. (Tiger) Burch, Jr., who died at his home in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, at age 72. Known almost universally as “Tiger,” he was a passionate and meticulous researcher, an extremely productive and influential scholar, and a “professional” in the very best sense of the word. These traits earned him the enduring respect of his northern colleagues, who included not just social scientists, but also wildlife biologists, Iñupiat elders, local and academic historians, and those of us who cut our teeth reading Tiger’s work and discussing our work with him at meetings and gatherings through the years.

Born in New Haven, Connecticut, on 17 April 1938, Tiger was the eldest of three children of Elsie Lillard Burch and the late Ernest S. Burch, Sr. Tiger’s formal academic resume included a bachelor’s degree in Sociology from Princeton University (BA, 1960), graduate degrees in Anthropology from the University of Chicago (MA, 1963; PhD, 1966), and service as associate professor and chair in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Manitoba (1966–74). After leaving the halls of academia, in 1979 Tiger became a research associate at the Smithsonian Institution and its Arctic Studies Center in Washington, D.C. He retained the Smithsonian affiliation for the rest of his life; however, it was non-paid, so he was actually an independent researcher for the last 30+ years of his career, producing the majority of his anthropological work in his home office and without institutional support.

Burch’s Arctic career began at age 16, when he served as a crewmember of Donald B. MacMillan’s 1954 expedition to Labrador, Baffin Island, and Greenland. After returning to Labrador in 1959 for a summer of field research, he began what turned out to be a lifelong relationship with the Iñupiat peoples of Northwest Alaska. He spent 11 months in the village of Kivalina in 1960–61 doing work equivalent to what is now known as an environmental impact study. Accompanied by his wife Deanne, in May 1964 Tiger returned to Kivalina to conduct dissertation research; however, in December the project came to a tragic end when he was badly burned attempting to save his field notes from a gasoline fire. That event could easily have destroyed the spirit of a lesser man, but just five months later Tiger and Deanne were back in Kivalina; he resumed his research and completed his dissertation shortly thereafter. Other notable stints of field research in 1969–70 and 1974–75 took Tiger to all of Northwest Alaska’s Iñupiat villages. By that time, Tiger had conducted about four years of active field research among the Iñupiat, accumulating a large and diverse body



Tiger Burch in Nuuk, Greenland, August 2008. (Photo courtesy of Birger Poppel.)

of data. Those data provided the foundation for his most important early publications (e.g., Burch, 1975, 1980), and also for the encyclopedic trilogy on the Iñupiat peoples of Northwest Alaska (Burch, 1998, 2005, 2006) that arguably will be the centerpiece of Tiger’s scholastic legacy.

Focusing primarily on the Iñupiat of Northwest Alaska during the traditional and early contact era, Burch employed an ethnohistorical method to explore important theoretical questions and produce significant contributions in a large number of subject areas. The most notable of the latter included kinship and social organization, oral history, warfare and trade, culture contact and change, socio-territorial organization, patterns of indigenous land and resource use, population dynamics, and hunter-gatherer societies. The breadth of his scholarly curiosity is further indicated by publications on such varied subjects as non-human entities in the physical landscape of the Iñupiat and a critique of long-standing views about prehistoric human use of caribou as a food resource.

Tiger also did important work concerning Alaska Native groups besides the Iñupiat and made significant contributions in other geographic areas. Examples of the latter include research on the Caribou Inuit (e.g., Burch, 1986), the compilation of a comprehensive map of indigenous peoples of the Arctic circa 1825, and a paper critically assessing the future relevance of “hunter-gatherers” as a research subject (Burch, 1994).

Burch’s work was characterized by deliberate purpose, exhaustive research (with an intense interest in archival records), critical attention to detail, and precise writing. While other scholars might not agree with certain arguments made or conclusions reached by Tiger in any given work, they never had to wonder what his objectives and theoretical orientations were, what sources of information

he had consulted, or how his research was conducted. He was entirely transparent in such matters and determined to ensure that his results were accurate, verifiable, and meaningful. Committed to scientific research and to improving the methods and techniques of anthropology, Tiger dutifully evaluated existing concepts relevant to his work; he modified them to increase their utility when appropriate and called for their rejection if his research indicated they were unsound (e.g., Burch, 1976; cf. Burch, 1998:307–308).

Tiger possessed great self-confidence but even greater humility; he never deluded himself into thinking he was incapable of error or had nothing left to learn. To the contrary, Tiger was notorious for refuting his own published work when later research revealed errors of fact or interpretation he had made previously. I admired the honesty and integrity demonstrated by his “Burch refutes Burch” actions (see, e.g., Burch, 1991a); when I told him so, Tiger replied that some colleagues had criticized him for publicly acknowledging his scholarly errors; one even characterized such an admission as “an act of cowardice”! Consistent with his typical decorum, he did not reveal the names of the colleagues who held these contrary points of view.

Burch’s candor in admitting his own mistakes was intended to help others avoid their replication, thereby contributing to the advancement of social scientific research. This concern is evident in his paper “The Method of Ethnographic Reconstruction” (Burch, 2010). Written more than 20 years ago and published posthumously, the paper details a methodology he developed for the conduct of retrospective research; it devotes special attention to the collection, evaluation, and use of oral history data from indigenous populations. With regard to the latter, Tiger elaborated on his conviction that events from the deep past could be illuminated by oral accounts in his paper “From Skeptic to Believer: The Making of an Oral Historian” (Burch, 1991b). He expended considerable effort explaining the value of oral history in ethnographic reconstructions. The critical manner in which he did so helps to explain why oral data are now commonly incorporated into anthropological discussions concerning the history of Alaska Native peoples. Native history always had a voice of its own, but Tiger was its most effective transmitter to northern scholars: he helped make it heard by demonstrating its validity as a data source in scientific research.

Given his amazing energy as a researcher, it is no surprise that Tiger left some projects unfinished. Chief among them is a book manuscript titled *Caribou Herds of Northwestern Alaska, 1850–2000*, in which Tiger analyzes and reconstructs caribou populations using the same methodology he developed for retrospective research on indigenous human populations. A small group of Tiger’s colleagues have joined together to complete the book, which the University of Alaska Press has expressed interest in publishing.

Tiger never sought the spotlight and appeared uncomfortable when it shone on him, which it often did. His accomplishments were formally recognized by his peers on two notable occasions: he received the Alaska

Anthropological Association’s “Professional Achievement Award” in 2003 and the “Life Achievement Award” of the International Congress of Arctic Social Scientists in 2008. A festschrift to Tiger is in progress and should be completed in 2012; it will further highlight his enormous influences in the realm of Arctic social sciences.

Tiger Burch’s scholarship will continue to shape discourse about northern indigenous peoples well into the future. But he was not only a scholar; Tiger was also a devoted family man. His wife of 47 years, Deanne Burch, was a constant pillar of support and encouragement; Tiger loved her dearly. He is survived by Deanne; his mother Elsie Burch; his younger brother John Burch; his children Karen, Sarah, and David, and their families (including six grandchildren). He also leaves behind many admiring friends and colleagues; I feel fortunate to count myself as one of them.

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