

GEORGE DONALD HOBSON (1923–2015)

It's been a hell of an interesting life. You've got the whole gamut of science in an area that's just so darned interesting.

(George Hobson on his affinity to the Arctic, quoted in Foster and Marino, 1986: back cover)

This quote encapsulates the man that was George Hobson: bluff, engaged, and captivated by the North. As head of the Polar Continental Shelf Project (PCSP) in the 1970s and 1980s, George was a virtual gatekeeper of the Arctic for innumerable researchers and visitors, enabling many of them to experience the Arctic for the first time. He left his mark in the Arctic as few others have done.

George was born in Hamilton, Ontario, on 8 January 1923, the son of Robert and Agnes Hobson. He attended Delta Collegiate and McMaster University (BSc in Mathematics and Physics) in Hamilton. He enrolled in the first master's-level geophysics course at the University of Toronto in 1946 and was awarded an MSc in Petroleum Geophysics in 1948. After graduation, George married Arletta (Arlie) Russell and moved to Edmonton, where he began his geophysics career with Heiland Exploration Canada Ltd. For 10 years George shuttled between seismic exploration in the northern Alberta bush and management positions, eventually becoming chief geophysicist at Merrill Petroleum Ltd. in Calgary.

In 1958, George left the private sector for the federal public service, joining the Geological Survey of Canada in Ottawa. One of his first assignments was the planning and organization of the first seismic survey of the petroleum-prospective Sverdrup Basin in the High Arctic. Thus was George launched on his Arctic career. He paid his first visit to the High Arctic in 1960 and went on to work on a number of projects in which the newly minted (1958) PCSP participated, such as reflection seismic profiling in the Beaufort Sea. George also conducted seismic studies in Hudson Bay, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and inland areas of the Precambrian shield of Ontario and Quebec.

In 1972, George was appointed Director of PCSP, succeeding Fred Roots, its first director. During George's 16-year tenure in the directorship, he saw the completion of several major projects: the Sea-Ice Atlas of Arctic Canada, the Arctic Ice Dynamics Joint Experiment (AIDJEX), the Lomonosov Ridge Experiment (LOREX), and the Canadian Experiment to Study the Alpha Ridge (CESAR). Another focus of activity was an ice island, informally named "Hobson's Choice"—a double entendre, as there was no other choice, "take it or leave it." The ice island had broken off the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf on the north coast of Ellesmere Island in 1982 and drifted southwesterly off northwestern Ellesmere Island. A well-equipped research station was established on it in 1984 and completed in 1985. The station operated successfully until the ice island drifted into the channels of the Queen Elizabeth Islands in 1990–91 and eventually broke up.



George Hobson at age 69 (Photo: Andreas Cordsen).

With George as director, PCSP came into its own as a logistics organization structured to support and, with his enthusiasm, even foster research and study of the Canadian Arctic, not only by scientists but also by artists, writers, and photographers. Without the assistance of PCSP, many Arctic projects would never have materialized. George introduced annual, two-day meetings for researchers, students, and other PCSP applicants to network, review progress on current projects, and plan for the coming field season with PCSP staff.

George was very much a hands-on director and adept at overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and cutting through red tape to "get the job done." He made regular trips to PCSP bases, where he would involve himself in day-to-day operations, such as taking the daily weather observations, handling the radio skeds, even helping to load and unload aircraft on the ice island and moving heavy equipment. Frequent visits to field camps of PCSP clients ensured that George kept up with their progress and was aware of their needs. He led by example.

George took pains to establish lines of communication with Northerners and involve them as much as possible in PCSP-related activities, which after all were taking place in their back yard. He travelled extensively to communities for consultation and outreach to ensure that Northerners were kept informed. As a result, George had a wide network



George Hobson (right) conferring with Jay Ardai (left) and John Jacobsen (back to camera) at the Ice Island Research Station, 1985. Reproduced with permission of Natural Resources Canada, 2016 (Photo: Michael Foster).

of friends and colleagues across the Canadian Arctic. In later years this broad acquaintance allowed him, as a lecturer and resource person on more than 15 Arctic cruises, to introduce countless others to Northerners. His daughter Linda, many years later, marveled at the number of places they stopped where George had “just one more person to see” before returning to the ship. This connection to the North also served him well when he took on the organization of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS) Fraser Lectureship in Northern Studies, which promoted science-based lectures and school visits in both northern and southern Canada.

Early on, George recognized that scientific research and the subsequent adoption of lessons learned are essential to upholding Canada’s sovereignty claims over the Arctic. He also prevailed on other agencies to support northern research; for example, the then Department of External Affairs contributed to the funding of the Hobson’s Choice Ice Island Research Station.

George retired from the post of PCSP director and from government service in 1988. His connections with the North, however, continued unbroken. Over the years George had developed a keen interest in the fate of Sir John Franklin’s 1845 expedition to the Arctic, an interest which led to his involvement with RCGS search expeditions in 1994, 1995, and 2000.

George was elected a Fellow of the RCGS in 1987 and served on the Society’s Board of Governors and on a number of RCGS committees, as well as going on several speaking tours across Canada. In 1992, George was introduced to

mountaineering and the challenges of working in the high peaks of the St. Elias Mountains of southwestern Yukon. He was project manager for the RCGS’s Logan ‘92 Expedition, undertaken to climb Mount Logan, Canada’s tallest peak, in celebration of Canada’s 125th birthday, the 150th anniversary of the Geological Survey of Canada (of which W.E. Logan was the first director), and the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Alaska Highway. The team, with George monitoring its every step from Ottawa, was successful in accurately measuring the mountain’s height using then-nascent GPS technology.

Many honours and awards were conferred on George, including the Massey Medal (1991), the Northern Science Award (1991), the Camsell Medal (1998), the Golden Jubilee Medal (2002), and Diamond Jubilee Medal (2012). In 1991 he received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from McMaster University.

Sadly, George’s latter retirement years were marked by poor health, which he endured with characteristic stoicism. However, George lived to witness the discovery of the wreck of the *Erebus*, Franklin’s flagship, in September 2014; no one was more excited by the find than he. It was a fitting coincidence that George was awarded the RCGS’s Sir Christopher Ondaatje Medal for Exploration only a few months after the ship’s discovery. George died at home in Manotick, Ontario, at age 92, on what would have been Sir John Franklin’s 229th birthday, 16 April 2015.

George is survived by his wife Arlie, sons Robert and Doug, daughters Linda and Donna, five grandchildren, and a great-grandson.

REFERENCE

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