

GUNTHER ABRAHAMSON (1926–2016)

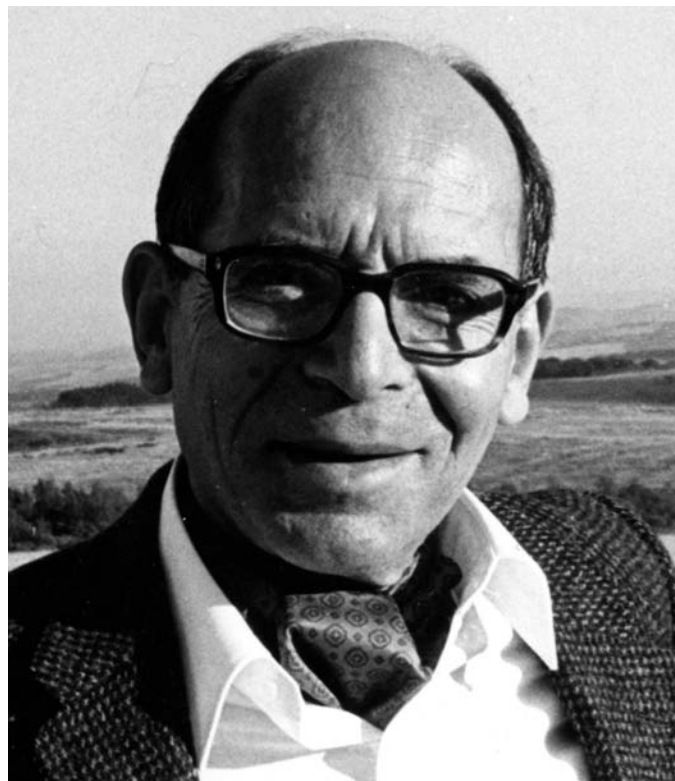
Gunther Abrahamson, who died in Ottawa on 8 April 2016, steered federal government programs in the North for three critical decades. He entered government service in 1959, at the time of John Diefenbaker's Northern Vision. As the federal government expanded its role in northern administration, Gunther oversaw the development of its Inuit economic, social, and cultural programs, and later their devolution to the territorial governments and to Inuit organizations. He was instrumental in the formation of the Beverly-Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board (BQCMB), the first wildlife co-management board in northern Canada.

Gunther was born in Berlin on 27 October 1926. In July 1939, his widowed mother sent him to safety in England on the Kindertransport. His older sister had been sent to Palestine shortly after Kristallnacht in November 1938. They did not see each other again until many years after the war, but they had been saved from extermination. Their mother, however, was deported and murdered.

Gunther arrived in England still young enough to regard his recent experience as a temporary adventure. After a brief stay in a refugee camp, he was sent to a children's home in Selkirk, Scotland. He bridled at its strict discipline, but he was soon taken in by a nearby farming family, with whom he formed an enduring bond. After the war he resumed his schooling and entered the local college of agriculture and then the University of Edinburgh, from which he graduated in 1949 with a degree in agriculture. He then taught at an agricultural college in England for three years.

Believing his opportunities would be limited in Britain, he left to work his way around world. He arrived in Canada in 1952 but got no farther. While crossing the country by train, he struck up a conversation with a forester, who told him that if he left Canada without seeing the Arctic he would forever regret it. So Gunther went north to Yellowknife and found work at Consolidated Gold Mine's smelter operation. He liked the environment, the people, the long summer nights, and especially the opportunity to explore Great Slave Lake by canoe and sailboat. In 1959, he entered government service as superintendent of the reindeer reserve east of the Mackenzie Delta, in charge of the Canadian government's reindeer industry. Two years later, serving as game management Officer in Aklavik, he was responsible for, among other things, the organization of registered trapping areas and trappers' councils.

While visiting nearby Tuktoyaktuk, he met Inge Hamann, a dental surgeon who had recently emigrated from Germany. They were married there in 1960. In April 1962, Gunther moved to Ottawa to head the Area Economic Survey program in the Department of Northern Affairs' Industrial Division. The Area Surveys were designed to identify local resource potential, as well as local economic needs and capacities, in the Inuit lands across the Arctic.



Gunther Abrahamson, Selkirk, Scotland, 1999.

On the basis of their recommendations, the Industrial Division initiated economic development projects; these included small-scale manufacture of arts, crafts, and country food, producer cooperatives, and arrangements for their marketing in the south. The Industrial Division promoted a vision of community economic development, with roots in Saskatchewan's cooperative movement and parallels in Newfoundland outport survival efforts in the face of resettlement. Gunther typified the kind of person the Industrial Division was looking for: he was experienced in the Arctic, used to the rigours of northern life, and comfortable in his relationship with Inuit. Gunther led the Area Economic Survey in the Tuktoyaktuk–Cape Parry region in 1962 and in the Coppermine–Holman region in 1963.

He assumed responsibility for implementing the Industrial Division's programs in 1964 and was made responsible for coordinating the Northern Administration Branch's economic development, education, social, and engineering services across the Central and Eastern Arctic the following year. After 1970, when many of the Branch's responsibilities were devolved to the Territorial Government in Yellowknife, Gunther became head of the Social and Cultural Development Division, responsible for the federal government's residual obligations for Inuit across the Arctic. In this new environment, the premium was on being able to work with both the territorial

and provincial governments in Inuit territory and the newly developing Inuit organizations in the context of comprehensive land-claim negotiations.

Gunther interpreted his mandate broadly, and with a small staff provided support in innovative ways for Inuit art, language, music, traditional games, film, television, publishing, vocational training, cooperative development, and even trans-boundary caribou management, acting as liaison with Inuit organizations. He made the best of what his department could offer, identifying and taking full advantage of opportunities to make a difference.

Today, the legacy of the Division's collaborative work is seen throughout the Arctic and beyond. It is reflected in the international renown of Inuit art and artists, in the television programs of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, in standard Inuktitut writing systems supported by digital syllabic fonts, in Inuktitut dictionaries and specialized lexicons, in published Inuit authors, and in the continuation of *Inuktitut* magazine. A generation of Inuit leaders graduated from the Division's vocational training programs.

Gunther was a committed supporter of the northern Aboriginal co-operative movement from its earliest day, responsible over several decades for the management of the federal government's various and quite innovative financial support programs geared towards their uniquely challenging training, community services, and employment development initiatives. By 2015, from small beginnings in Nunavik under the auspices of the Industrial Division, 46 Inuit and Dene locally owned cooperatives, with an annual business volume of \$550 million, had spread across the North.

Gunther's personality and management style were well suited to the challenges and opportunities of the time. Always a team player, approachable, considerate, and open to innovation, he relied heavily for success in implementing programs on the trust, cooperation, and support he consistently received from colleagues, both above and below him, in the Department's hierarchy. Also essential to his success was the respect he earned from Inuit individuals and organizations for his responsiveness to their proposals, and his refreshingly unbureaucratic, down-to-earth approach to collaboration. As Louis Tapardjuk, a veteran Inuit politician and cultural activist, candidly remarked, Gunther "was sincere and honest...he didn't bullshit anyone...didn't seek any glory or recognition" (Bell, 2016). This self-effacing quality was evident in Gunther's ability to extend the reach and worth of the programs he directed by securing support from other relevant government departments, agencies, and corporations, some of which had no previous direct connection with the Arctic or with Inuit. "The more the merrier" was his preferred approach to the achievement of common goals.

Those who worked with and for Gunther often referred to him as an enabler. There were many fond memories of how he managed to work the bureaucracy to enable others to do useful and creative things. In this way he accomplished much, but always wanted those whom he enabled to take

the credit for it. They were in many respects his family, and he maintained that circle long after his retirement in 1985.

Perhaps his proudest achievement was the BQCMB, created in response to a widely perceived crisis in the management of eastern barren-ground caribou herds. Ranging over the Northwest Territories, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, the herds were thought by many to be in terminal decline. The reasons for this decline, and what should be done about it, were deeply contested between harvesters and wildlife scientists, Aboriginal harvesters and other users, and among the jurisdictions. Media reports of overharvesting and waste exacerbated the conflict. It was a problem that couldn't wait for the protracted negotiations over land claims that were just beginning. Drawing on the experience of Don Snowden, his charismatic former Chief at the Industrial Division, Gunther presided over initiatives, including the use of interactive videos, to improve communication between scientists and users and among user groups throughout the range of the herds. The outcome was a user-government co-management advisory board, a model that presaged similar institutions negotiated in land-claim agreements across Canada. The Board has now operated for nearly 35 years, providing a forum for dialogue not only between governments and users, but also between scientists and users, in which traditional environmental knowledge would be brought to bear in cooperation with scientific research. In practice, the Board worked because of the opportunity it provided for the face-to-face learning, sharing, and mutual respect that Gunther unflinching promoted.

He continued to be the quiet and modest force behind the Board, guiding it through two 10-year renewals in times of restraint, when there were many who would have been happy to get rid of it. A founding member of the Board, Gunther remained its secretary/treasurer and its corporate memory long after his retirement. The Board recently renamed its scholarship fund in his memory, a tribute to the high regard in which all members held him.

Gunther was awarded the Canadian Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977 and was made a Fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America in 1983. After his retirement, he acted as president of the Northwest Territories Cooperative Business Development Fund and the Inuit Art Foundation, in addition to his role with the BQCMB. He also served on various local public service boards and committees in Ottawa.

For many years, Gunther put his earlier life behind him, although he never forgot his boyhood years in Selkirk, and from time to time he visited his foster family and the one kindly matron at the Priory. In his sixties, he began to reconnect with the Kindertransport lads with whom he had spent his teenage years in Scotland. They, along with his staff at Northern Affairs, became his extended family. In his last years, he began recording his uprooting and the loss of his family in Berlin. That was a difficult but necessary coming to terms for him, yet Gunther bore neither grudge nor enmity. He was predeceased by his wife Inge in 2015 and by his sister Daisy, in Israel, in 2013.

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