

KENNETH LUCIEN DE LA BARRE (1932–2026)

With deep appreciation for a long and creative life well lived, we recognize the passing of Kenneth Lucien de la Barre on 8 May 2026, in Whitehorse, Yukon. Ken, former director of the Arctic Institute of North America's (AINA) Montreal office from 1962 to 1976, and honorary fellow of AINA since 1976, was born in Montréal on 4 May 1932.

AINA was only 23 years old and a binational institution when, in 1962, a departing employee ran into Ken on Montréal's Sherbrooke Street and suggested that Ken apply for work with AINA. Ken soon became director of the Montreal office. The office worked closely with the AINA office in Washington D.C., and Ken travelled frequently to work with United States office personnel.

The binational character of AINA came into play often during one of the major projects of Ken's years, the Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition (Fisher, 1967). Working with Dr. Walter Wood, American geographer and respected world-renowned alpinist, and Dr. Fred Roots, prominent Canadian geologist and head of the Polar Continental Shelf Project, Ken pulled together 300 climbers who undertook 39 climbs and 27 first ascents with teams who named peaks after Canadian provinces. The historic mountaineering project demonstrated the sort of collaboration among nations and non-profits—AINA and the Alpine Club of Canada – and skills that the best work in the north always requires.

During the years that Ken was director, the AINA was a key player in a number of massive and multidisciplinary field and research programs. Among them, the Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research and Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research Polar Oceans Conference, the High Altitude Physiology Study, which was launched in 1967, the International Northern Libraries Colloquy meetings, the Baffin Bay North Water Project (1963–1975), the Icefield Ranges Research Project (de la Barre, 1977), which operated out of AINA's Kluane Lake Research Station (KLRS) during this period, and The Devon Island Expedition and the Man in the North Project, both operational during 1963–75 (de la Barre et al., 2019).

Ken was as curious as he was competent, and even when he felt out of his element, he used his communication skills to bring people and knowledge together to the benefit of advancing Arctic research. Reflecting on his work in his unpublished memoir, he wrote “[This] was all very new to me but I was never afraid to ask questions and I developed very good relationships with the young and old university and government researchers, with the naval people, and various government ministers...I had one of the best jobs imaginable travelling literally throughout the entire Canadian Arctic, courtesy of Fred Roots, and the Canadian government who headed up the largest research project in the Canadian Arctic. And because I was successfully applying for and administering large and complicated projects like the Devon Island Research Station and the North Water Project, my travels took me



FIG. 1. Ken perusing one of the many AINA publications.

throughout the Canadian High Arctic, with forays into Alaska and Greenland.”

Ken's work with AINA went well beyond the title of director. Ken's recruitment of two people key to AINA's longevity is a testament to his keen eye for people and their potential. He recruited his long-time friend, Gerald Thompson, in 1965 (de la Barre et al., 2019). Together in 1973 they hired Andrew “Andy” Williams, KLRS's infamous manager, aircraft mechanic, and high altitude mountain pilot (Yukon News, 2026).

During his AINA years, Ken and his family were familiar faces at the KLRS, travelling many summers from Montréal to the shores of Kluane Lake, living in a rudimentary cabin on or just off the runway for up to four months. In fact, his mother-in-law, Bridie, was the camp cook in 1972 when she accompanied the family for their summer months living at “base camp,” as KLRS was often referred to as. Before leaving AINA in 1976, when the organization relocated to the University of Calgary, Ken also oversaw the beginnings of AINA's work with data management and access and research ethics issues.

From 1979 to 1986 Ken was employed as deputy director of Katimavik, Canada's signature national youth program. Always a passionate Canadian, Ken travelled all over the country supporting Katimavik teams and their local partners. For this work, Senator Jacques Hébert nominated Ken for a Commemorative Medal, 125th Anniversary of Canadian Confederation, which Ken received from the Governor General of Canada in 1992.

Ken was among those early to support the connection between Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) and climate change. He worked with Makivik and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), formerly known as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, and presented the TEK exhibit on their behalf at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.



FIG. 2. Ken enjoying a day of kick-sledding in Yukon.

His organizational and fund-development skills were so well known around the north that he was recruited by Donat Savoie, chief head organizer, Government of Canada, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development's director of scientific and circumpolar affairs, to organize Pope John Paul II's visit to Fort Simpson, NWT, in 1987. In his unpublished memoir, Ken recounts how the Pope congratulated him on the "excellent planning" of his trip when shaking hands with him before they disembarked from the plane in Edmonton. "NO KIDDING!! He actually said that!" he wrote.

Ken's curiosity, intellect, and energy, along with his optimism, took him from dishwashing on Montréal's Main (he began work in cafés where his single mother, Peggy, waitressed), through dropping out of school ("I was too busy making money to go to school," he wrote in his memoir) to athletic championships for schools where he was not enrolled. During young adulthood he drove frequently to Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia for jazz and baseball with a group of young men friends, including Gerald Thompson whom he had known since he was 14 years of age (de la Barre et al., 2019).

Ken always gave credit to his early mentors. These were people who saw his humanist and intellectual gifts despite

his youthful resistance to formal education. His first jobs were in business in Quebec, where he worked tirelessly at becoming bilingual (with some success), fueled by a love of the culture and language of his home province. In his familial memoir Ken wrote, "I have been able to move from job to job and project to project because of the help and advice of people I had worked with or was working for."

In his retirement years and well into his 80s, Ken worked on the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on a peace through tourism project with Canadian Executive Service Overseas (CESO, now Catalyste+). With CESO, Ken also worked in Guyana on a community economic development and tourism project and on similar projects with the Gitksan'etsu'Wtsu in Hazelton (British Columbia) and the Taku River Tlingit (Atlin, British Columbia). During his final decade of service and consultancy work, he also acted as a trusted advisor on arts, culture, and tourism planning with the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) in the Eeyou Istchee Region of northern Quebec.

Ken's thirst for knowledge in a formal setting did catch up with him: while working and raising a family with his wife Pat, Ken earned bachelor's degrees in commerce (1964) and arts (1967) and then a master's degree in human geography from McGill University (1988). His long record of publications shows a diversity rare in today's highly specialized world, spanning northern development investment strategies, Arctic demography, TEK, economic and community development, and tourism (for instance, see de la Barre, 1982, 1988, 1992; de la Barre et al., 2005). Ken also authored the Arctic Regions section of *Britannica* books annually from 1966 to 2007.

Ken always credited the love of his life, Pat, for her creativity and endurance during years when they didn't always have a sustained income. Pat also played a supporting role in Ken's work with AINA, hosting informal meetings and dinners in their home and contributing to community life at KLRs during the summers the family spent there. Later, she was his administrative assistant on research projects he worked on after leaving AINA.

Ken was father to Suzanne (b. 1961), Tracy (b. 1963), and Michel (b. 1969) and delighted in his role of "Poppy" to numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the Yukon and Montréal. He and Pat moved from Montréal to Whitehorse in 1996, intending to stay one year for the birth of their first grandchild, instead they made the Yukon home for the rest of their lives.

With more time on his hands during his "retirement," Ken enjoyed prolonged visits to Montreal where Michel and family reside. He spent time with them in their day-to-day lives, participated in cycling events like Montréal's Tour de l'île, and attended that city's many festivals. He travelled to Edinburgh for the Fringe Festival (four times!) and, for his 80th birthday, walked the 790-kilometre-long Camino de Santiago in Spain with his good friend and renowned anthropologist, Ignatius 'Iggy' Larusic. A committed volunteer, Ken could often be seen

supporting cyclists in road relays and doing whatever was necessary for small community music festivals across the Yukon. In Whitehorse, Ken was an active and engaged citizen committed to social justice and climate change work through the Whitehorse United Church and with various not-for-profit organizations, including the Yukon Conservation Society and the Yukon Wholistic Health Network. He also continued to participate in conferences related to his broad interests, quietly sharing his experience and expertise with new generations of researchers, entrepreneurs, and government employees.

Along with his contributions to diverse AINA and Canadian North initiatives and community contributions, many will remember Ken for the gifts he gave to us daily in his later years —always humility, recognition of gender and human equality, and his continuing optimism despite

his view that climate change was the critical challenge facing humanity. Ken's elder daughter, Suzanne, describes him thus: "My father was a notable optimist. A committed humanist. A thoughtful scholar. And a formidable boulevardier — enjoying his favourite pastime walking or cycling the streets of Whitehorse or Montreal and reading the newspaper and holding court in cafés and other gathering places." His optimism remained undimmed, especially in relation to the great potential humans hold, and his valiant belief that they would (eventually) "do the right thing." He remained his caring, thoughtful self even when afflicted by the dementia that impacted his life during his last year.

We wish you the icefields, mountains, and Arctic oceans, Ken. Your family and many friends in your diverse pursuits will miss you.

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