

DAVID DAMAS (1926–2010)

David Damas, eminent Arctic ethnologist and scholar of comparative social organization, passed away on 14 April 2010 in Burlington, Ontario. He was 83. Mindful of his love of sailing and the Great Lakes freighters that he could see from his apartment overlooking Lake Ontario, his nieces respected his wishes and put his ashes to rest in waters near Burlington Bay.

David Damas was born on 27 December 1926 in Algoma, Wisconsin, the youngest of three sons born to a tugboat captain and his wife. The family moved during David's early years to Toledo, Ohio, where he completed his elementary and secondary schooling. Like many boys of his day, he joined the Boy Scouts, but unlike the majority, he earned Eagle Scout designation and a taste for adventure.

David joined the U.S. Marine Corps after World War II had ended. After fulfilling his obligation for military service, he worked on tugboats and lake freighters, eventually receiving his ship's Master's License. He interrupted this period to earn a BA in Literature from the University of Toledo in 1950, but by continuing to work on ships, he earned enough to satisfy his passion for athletic pursuits, among them sailing for pleasure and climbing mountains all over the world. These experiences, however, began to fuel another desire as well. In 1957, he enrolled in the master's program in Anthropology at the University of Chicago, receiving his AM in 1960. His PhD in Anthropology followed in 1962.

Learning how Arctic peoples organized themselves and how they lived their lives engaged David during his graduate student days. Between August 1960 and August 1961, he undertook fieldwork in the Iglulik region of the Northwest Territories. At that time Inuit still dressed in furs, traveled by dog team, lived off the land, and periodically touched in at points of service. He traveled with them, researching Inuit kinship, social organization, and personality structure. David soon understood the harsh realities that Inuit coped with daily, and he did not romanticize the lives of the people he worked with. He rarely spoke of the physical hardships associated with his research undertakings, and when he did, it was with a wry sense of humour. He was a great defender of one's right to choose what one would do, but he also believed that one ought not to complain if the outcome of those choices had consequences that were not contemplated in the beginning.

After his appointment as Arctic Ethnologist at the National Museum of Canada in 1962, David spent long periods of time in the Arctic. He spent a year investigating all-native and centralized communities in the Bathurst Inlet, Perry River, and Cambridge Bay areas, collecting information relevant to the reconstruction of aboriginal Copper Eskimo society. In 1965, he spent February to August in the Gjoa Haven and Spence Bay regions, focusing on Netsilik society, and he also collected ethnographic data from extant all-native as well as mixed communities. In 1967, between July and December, David was in Repulse



David Damas traveling in the Iglulik region, 1960–61.

Bay, NWT, seeking Netsilik and Iglulik information to document a Netsilik influx into that area around the year 1900. He continued that project in Rankin and Chesterfield inlets between July and October 1968.

David's fieldwork spanned all seasons and was marked by meticulous collection of evidence. His Arctic work alone yielded two books (1963, 2002), 10 articles in scholarly journals, and 13 book chapters, along with 22 shorter communications and book reviews. He also edited three volumes, one on band societies (1969a), another on cultural ecology (1969b), and a third on the peoples of the Arctic Culture Area (1984). The latter, Volume 5 of the *Handbook of North American Indians*, included 59 chapters that ranged from the prehistory, linguistics, and biology of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic to concise ethnographic and socio-cultural descriptions of their societies from the Pacific and Bering Sea to Greenland. David's contributions substantially advanced the world's understanding of these peoples. His particular emphasis on the contact-traditional phase in the history of the Central Arctic has been instrumental in understanding the complex origin of modern Arctic communities.

I was familiar with some of David's research on band-level societies when I joined McMaster University in 1975, six years after his own appointment there. Though I am a biological anthropologist, David was curious about my field experiences in the Subarctic, and he sometimes questioned the validity of interpretations arising from genetic studies. He never married, so when classes concluded at the end of the day, he enjoyed discussions at the Faculty Club. Once, when a conversation was particularly lively, I grumbled that I must leave for home to prepare supper and spend some time with my children. The next day he reminded me that it was my choice to have children. Another time I was incensed with his suggestion that the department hire

another Arctic ethnologist. Later, when I called him at home to apologize for my outburst, he said it was normal to feel passionate about important things. He was gracious as he listened to me, and ultimately he supported the appointment of a skeletal biologist. Typically David remained silent when I opined that few social anthropologists made an effort to understand anthropological genetics, but it was my turn to eat crow when he stopped by my office one afternoon, asking if I knew a human geneticist called Newton Morton.

I then learned that David had spent a year (July 1975 – July 1976) on the atoll of Pingelap in Micronesia, and he had been corresponding with Morton, an eminent human population geneticist, who had done a number of detailed genetic and genealogic investigations on Pingelap some years earlier. Like the classical ethnologists of old, David was determined to learn what others knew, and he wanted to add to that knowledge by methods of contrast and comparison. He had picked Micronesia because its populations were small and familially based, and their ecological circumstances differed from those in the Arctic.

David's goal was the reconstruction of Pingelapese society, and he began by investigating kinship and land tenure. In the summer of 1978, he returned to Pingelap and visited two other atolls (Pohnpei and Majuro) to investigate adoption practices. He continued his three-month visits in 1980 and 1983 to research the Pingelapese system of titles and land tenure, spending time on each of Pohnpei, Pingelap, and Mokil. These studies culminated in a book on land tenure in Pingelap (1994) and six journal articles that dealt with kinship, adoption, atoll political systems, and social structure.

David enjoyed describing his Micronesian fieldwork to friends, and among the best of his expositions in the Faculty Club described his subsisting for three months on Enfalac (a brand of canned infant formula) and the occasional bartered fish. Apparently a hurricane had destroyed the island's sole landing strip just after his arrival, and because relief planes could not land and ships came infrequently, supplies had run out in the stores. The Arctic was not the only place where one could encounter hardships! David's illustration of the unexpected consequences of his choice to do research on Pingelap poked fun at himself, but his humour belied the seriousness with which he treated his academic work. Research mattered to him. It mattered also that his students learned about kinship and understood social organization. He was selective about his graduate students; he cared about each one, and he cared that they would find jobs upon their graduation.

David retired as Professor Emeritus from McMaster University in 1991 and then focused more of his attention on playing golf—a game he loved—and taking his sailboat out on the lake. His research commitment remained, however, and he continued publishing for more than a decade after his official retirement. His last book (2002) considered the role of Canadian government policy in bringing about enormous changes in Inuit lifestyle manifest in the Central Arctic during the 20th century. To gather evidence, David

meticulously mined the Canadian National Archives, the Hudson's Bay Company records in the Public Archives of Manitoba, and the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, among other sources. The exposition of his findings was ethnohistorical and included perspectives that arose from direct contact with indigenous people at the time of the great shift to settlement. He put great weight on what he had been told and what he observed, balancing these with archival data. As one of a handful of ethnologists who had worked in the Arctic during that period, he was uniquely positioned to compare and contrast the Inuit and Euro-Canadian records. In the introduction to the book, David stated that a "proper ethnohistorical study should strive to embody the scholarly ideals of objectivity and balance, and eschew excessively polemic or partisan positions." That statement is also a good description of the philosophy that governed his life.

David Damas was a consummate ethnologist whose fieldwork spanned the Canadian Central Arctic and the atolls of Micronesia. David is survived by his sister-in-law in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and by four nieces and one nephew in Ohio. I am particularly grateful to Mary Humphrys, his loving niece from Toledo, for her descriptions of her "Uncle David." He was indeed a good and decent man, and I was privileged to be among those who knew him: a man of enormous observational skills and profound integrity, who lived by his principles and expected the same from others.

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