THE REINDEER BOTANIST: ALF ERLING PORSILD, 1901–1977. Wendy Dathan. Calgary: University of Calgary Press. 726 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-1-55238-586-9. CAD 44.95

Wendy Dathan describes the adventurous life of Erling Porsild, known worldwide as an outstanding expert in Arctic botany. The biography is based on a remarkably broad collection of documents. The most important part of the documentation is Porsild's personal archive with his diaries, notes, correspondence, drafts and comments. Important sources of information were Archives Canada and the archives of the National Herbarium in Ottawa. The Lomen family archive in Alaska contributed many details of the reindeer projects in Alaska and Canada.

Wendy Dathan tells the life history of Alf Erling Porsild in a well written chronology of events based on an excellent selection of documents. She quotes interesting details, puts them together into episodes like milestones illustrating important advances in the development of Arctic botany. This method of approach reveals a wealth of hitherto unknown facets of the history of botanical research in Canada during the last century. Wendy Dathan transfers her careful analysis of historical documents into a fascinating spectacle of events, encounters, ideas, discussions and comments. The book contains three main parts:

Reindeer Survey / Exploration, 1901–1928

Canada's Reindeer Herd, 1925–1935

The National Herbarium in Peace and War, 1936–1977.

A few selected topics may illustrate the very rich life and work of Alf Erling Porsild. Erling was the son of the botanist Morten Pedersen Porsild, who was appointed in 1906 as Director of the Danish Arctic Station on Disko island in Godhavn (Nuuk). Therefore, the family with the two sons Robert (born 1898) and Erling (1901) moved to Greenland. The two boys became familiar with living conditions in the Arctic. They spoke fluently the language of the natives. They were keen observers and learned botany from their father. Later, they were educated at a boarding school in Denmark. Erling had to return to Greenland due to a severe illness. He had not finished the full programme of the gymnasium school and had not reached the level to be accepted by universities.

These unusual premises determined Erling's life. Arctic experience and an excellent knowledge of botany opened the chance to explore the living conditions for reindeer that were to be introduced in northern Canada. The description of the adventurous travels of Erling and his brother along the Mackenzie River forms a major part of the biography. Their botanical field work enlarged considerably the knowledge of flora and the distribution of species in the visited area. The huge collection of specimens became a major part of the National Herbarium at Ottawa.

Erling took over the task of curator of the National Herbarium in 1936. This position offered him the possibility to collect plants in hitherto unknown regions of northern Canada. As official adviser of the Reindeer Programme, he had the chance to use small aircraft for reconnaissance flights in the vast area of the Mackenzie delta. He recognized details of the vegetation from the air and documented important details with aerial photos.

He was a very active member of a small group of colleagues who tried to broaden the base for botanical studies in the Canadian north and to build up adequate institutions and associations. This network of scientists and representatives of the administration had to struggle severely against the difficulties caused by the economic depression in the 1930s.

Porsild had to interrupt his work at the National Herbarium in the World War II. Germany had occupied Denmark in April 1940. The Danish Governor Eske Brun declared that Greenland would not capitulate. The United States of America and Canada feared that German commandos could attack Ivigtut in Greenland which then had the only mine in the world producing cryolite, an indispensable mineral for making aluminum. Therefore, the two governments decided to establish consulates in Greenland. Erling Porsild was appointed in 1940 as Canadian consul. This official mission brought him high personal prestige on a national and international level. He also had the chance to continue his botanical studies in Greenland.

The consulate was closed in 1946. Porsild returned to Ottawa and continued his work at the herbarium. His publications gave him a high reputation as an internationally known expert in Arctic botany. He used a sabbatical year to visit Europe, and attended the International Botanical Congress of 1954 in Paris. An initiative of the University of Copenhagen enabled him to submit a thesis for a doctorate which was accepted in 1955. He was involved in the preparation of the International Botanical Congress during 1959 in Montreal and became one of the promoters for the formation of the Arctic Institute of North America. Porsild died unexpectedly in Vienna on 13 November 1977.

May I end my review with a personal reminiscence? I met Porsild in the National Herbarium during the afternoon of 18 September 1953. I had returned from Baffin Island, where I had spent the summer as botanist of the second Baffin Island Expedition of the Arctic Institute of North America. Porsild was extremely interested in the results of my investigation in the glaciated area of the Penny Highlands. We discussed the altitudinal distribution of plants on the east side of the Penny Icecap and argued about the possibilities for plants to survive a cold climatic phase on nunataks. Erling offered to compare my herbarium of the summer with the rich collections of the National Herbarium. I accepted his generous suggestion gratefully. Then he invited me for dinner. Smoking his pipe, he told me a story showing his excellent memory for details, his experience as a keen observer and his ability to interpret a new observation.

He had the chance to meet his parents at Disko when he served as Canadian consul in Greenland during the war. Passing the garden of their house, he was surprised to see a group of extremely vigorous plants on a small spot. He remembered that he had transported dung from their sheep when he was a boy. His small wheel-barrow tumbled over and a small portion of dung was lost, falling on to the ground. When Erling returned in 1946, he realised immediately that a handful of dung had fertilised the poor soil with a long-lasting effect for more than three decades.

I keep Erling Porsild in my memory as a friendly helpful colleague, and an eminent scientist with a profound experience in Arctic botany (Fritz Hans Schwarzenbach, Kistlerweg 9, 3006 Bern, Switzerland (frhs@gmx.ch)).