

## DR. WILLIAM O. PRUITT

DR. WILLIAM O. PRUITT, JR. After a long and very full life, Professor William "Bill" O. Pruitt Jr., a Senior Scholar in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Manitoba, died on December 7, 2009. He left quietly and peacefully, with family at his side. He was 87 years old. Bill is survived by his wife of 58 years, Erna Pruitt; daughter, Cheryl Pruitt (Mick), and son, Charles Pruitt. Dr. Pruitt, the founder of the Taiga Biological Station in northeastern Manitoba, has been called "the father of North American boreal ecology." In 1989, Dr. Pruitt, whose research on the influence of snow on animals adapted to the north is known worldwide, received the Canadian government's Northern Science Award Centenary Medal "for significant contribution to understanding of the North." He was also the recipient of the Scion Distinguished Naturalist Medal, the Vilhjalmur Stefansson Award, as well as an Award of Merit for his teaching film, *Techniques in Boreal Ecology*. He was a Fellow of the Explorers Club, in recognition of his contribution to scientific knowledge. "He was a great supporter of wildlife research and conservation, a passionate visionary of snow ecology, an inspiring teacher, and a unique personality within the Manitoba wildlife scene," said wildlife biologist Dr. Robert Wrigley, curator of Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park Zoo. "When Dr. Pruitt spoke, he commanded attention and respect. It is sad that we can no longer phone him and ask his advice on some question, and I will never observe snow piled on spruce boughs without thinking of him." Born in 1922 in Easton, Maryland, Bill's earliest fascination with natural history began in the rich ecosystem of the Chesapeake Bay area. He obtained his undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland, and served in the US Army Medical Corps overseas during the Second World War. He was doing post-graduate work in zoology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor when he met a young woman from St Louis, Missouri, who was doing her post-graduate work on spiders. This young woman, Erna Nauert, shared his enthusiasm for field work and adventure, and they were married in 1951. Shortly after their marriage, Bill and Erna packed a truck and drove from Michigan to Alaska, up the newly-opened Alaska Highway. Throughout his life, he would tell people close to him that Erna was his inspiration, his greatest friend, and the constant love of his life. The young couple settled in central Alaska, building their own log home and homesteading. Both Pruitt children were born in Alaska. Bill worked on the major Canadian Wildlife Service survey of caribou populations that took place across northern Canada in the late 1950s, and developed a lifelong respect and affection for caribou as studied the huge herds up close. From local trappers and hunters, he learned the outdoor skills that he passed on to his own students for the rest of his life: how to build snow shelters, stay warm, read weather conditions, use dog teams, and so on. He was eventually hired as a field biologist by the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. In the late 1950s, the United States Atomic Energy Commission initiated a plan, codenamed Project Chariot, to detonate up to six nuclear explosions along the northwest coast of Alaska to create a new deep water harbour for future mineral extraction. Dr. Pruitt, along with botanist Dr. Leslie Viereck and geographer Dr. Don Foote, all specialists in their respective fields, were tapped for their expertise for the project. However, their research quickly revealed that "unprecedented and irreversible damage" would result from such nuclear explosions. Here Dr. Pruitt was to display the fearlessness that lay under the surface of his gentle demeanour. Despite an overwhelming pressure to rubberstamp the flawed scheme, he and his two colleagues stood up to the university and the governments of Alaska and the US. "The whole situation climaxed in February 1962 when my final report was censored by the head of the biology department at the University of Alaska," Dr. Pruitt said in a paper he wrote about the topic several years ago. "A number of scientific conclusions were modified severely or

completely eliminated. Moreover, those of us in the biology faculty who had publicly protested the false statements had our contracts 'not renewed'." In his book, *The Firecracker Boys* (St. Martin's Press), author and oral historian Dr. Dan O'Neill writes that Project Chariot was "stopped by the first successful protest against the American nuclear establishment, started by the Eskimos at Point Hope, University of Alaska biologists, and an old bush pilot or two" and finally reaching the Senate and White House. "The networking done by the Chariot protestors laid the foundations for the environmental movement of the 1960s and '70s," he observes. Three decades later, on May 7, 1993, Dr. Pruitt and Dr. Viereck were personally honoured with special citations by the Alaska State Legislature for their - as Dr. Viereck put it - "allegiance to truth and personal integrity." "Gentlemen, you were right, and we, the people of Alaska, owe you a debt of gratitude for holding strong to your principles. The members of the Eighteenth Alaska State Legislature humbly thank you," says the citation. Dr. Pruitt was also presented with an Honorary Doctor of Science degree at the same time by the University of Alaska. The stand taken by Dr. Pruitt and the others against the Project Chariot proposal had a price. Dr. Pruitt lost his job at the University of Alaska, and he began the search for another university-level teaching and research position. Job offers mysteriously dried up before he could accept them. He found temporary positions doing field work in Colorado and teaching at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, moving the family each time. When he concluded that it might never be possible to find a secure position in his field at any university in the United States, the Pruitts decided to move to Canada, and in 1965, Dr. Pruitt took a job in the Department of Biology at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. There he lived in a mutualistic relationship with his students, many of whom to this day remember his lessons about the adaptations of mammals and the importance of preserving a variety of habitats; the peculiar adaptation that allowed him to draw bilaterally symmetrical structures on the blackboard using both hands at once; and the adventure of field trips in all weather conditions, says the inscription on the Honourary Doctor of Science degree presented to Bill by Memorial University on May 11, 2001. The environmentalist aspects of Bill Pruitt's behaviour were nowhere clearer than in his role in the establishment of Gros Morne National Park. In the initial boundary studies, he tried to establish a zone that would protect the ranges of as many species as possible, not just provide temporary range for humans seeking a natural' experience. In 1969, the Pruitts moved to Winnipeg where Bill had been hired to teach at the University of Manitoba. In 1973, Dr. Pruitt launched the Taiga Biological Station, a research outpost in the boreal forest, where he held countless field trips for his undergraduate courses and provided a location for longer-term field research by graduate students and visiting scholars. Over the years, scores of ecology studies were carried out at the Taiga Biological Station, and the data records include weather and snow cover observations, and mammal, plant, and invertebrate population studies very likely the longest-running continuous data set of its kind from anywhere in the entire boreal region. Major funding for the Taiga Biological Station came at first from Dr. Pruitt's own pocket, and was gradually expanded to donations large and small from a very wide range of supporters. For Dr. Pruitt, everything was subordinate to taking any opportunity to spend time outdoors observing animals interacting with their natural habitat; he shied away from meetings, business arrangements, and other indoor activities unless his attention was absolutely required. He was very grateful to the Fort Whyte Foundation for receiving and disbursing funds in trust for the work of the Taiga Biological Station, thus allowing him to direct his own energies to field work, teaching, research, and writing. Bill Pruitt's passion was field work. In a 2001 speech, he discussed the current pressure on scientists to stay in their offices and rely heavily on secondhand, incomplete, or speculative data rather than basic observation. He said, This is a

common problem today. Too many people become caught up in artificial simulators and explanations of nature. This is what we call keyboard ecology.' Remember, all the information you read and studied in your textbooks originally had to be observed, counted, and filtered through the eyes, brains, and experiences of real-time field scientists. He worked with generations of undergraduate and graduate students, ensuring that they received a strong groundwork in the fundamental theories of biology and the skills of field research. He loved winter and snow. A long-time colleague and friend, Francis Cook, has said: I'll always remember dashing into the Duff Roblin Building to pick up some collecting gear the first warm spring night in 1969 fired up because the frogs were about to start calling and my field studies could begin on amphibians and meeting Bill, sad-faced because his field season for the year was ending with the disappearance of the snow. Two biologists on very different annual cycles! Bill was often a seasonal guest on local radio stations, explaining the ecological importance as well as the simple beauty of winter in Canada. He pioneered and insisted on the use of specific terms for all kinds of snow formations, drawing together a specialized vocabulary of Inuktitut, Inupiat, and Dene words that is widely used today. Even after his formal retirement from the university, Dr. Pruitt continued to work, holding a position of Senior Scholar at U of M, and continuing to supervise graduate students at the Taiga Biological Station. He was an associate editor of the scientific journal *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*. He was a longtime member of the Manitoba Naturalists Society (now Nature Manitoba), and was honorary chairperson of the organization for a period of time. Bill's text writings are classics in the field, and his work is known and respected far beyond the immediate borders of Manitoba or Canada. He wrote an illustrated book on animals of the north, *Wild Harmony*, which has been translated into many languages and read around the world. He co-wrote *Boreal Forest of Canada and Russia*, a bilingual Russian-English study based on the decades of research findings at the Taiga Biological Station in Canada and the Kostroma Taiga Biological Station in Russia. He also contributed articles to popular publications such as *Harpers and Audubon*, and scientific journals such as *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* and the *Journal of Mammalogy*. He maintained an active correspondence with hundreds of naturalists around the world. He was a stickler for precision, accuracy, and clarity, and many of his former students have remarked that they learned their best writing skills from Bill Pruitt. In later years Dr. Pruitt became increasingly puzzled by the failure of Canadian academics and politicians to recognize the boreal forest as a world resource of immeasurable value. He never became bitter at the lack of attention the boreal forests received, nor at the difficulties that faced researchers who wished to study an area so crucial in times of global warming. He always had faith that good sense would ultimately prevail and science win the day. A couple of weeks before he died, when he read that the Canadian Boreal Initiative's report showed that the boreal forests store 22% of all carbon on the earth's land surface (almost twice as much as the world's tropical forests) and that the report was being acclaimed by scientists worldwide, he smiled and said, they'll get it in the end. Bill was deeply distressed and concerned by social injustice. He followed many causes, and was a strong supporter of his union, the U of M Faculty Association. Those who knew Dr. Pruitt professionally may not have realized the full breadth of his other interests: woodwork (he made everything from log buildings to musical instruments), trains and railroads of all descriptions, genealogy, Malamute dogs, and single malt Scotch, to name just a few. With a twinkle in his eye he would often declaim Robert Service or quote a favourite Monty Python skit or a routine from *Beyond the Fringe*. He was a dedicated family man, and led the Pruitts and his close friends through a rich and adventurous life. He will be sorely missed. The University of Manitoba is establishing a graduate student bursary in the name of William and Erna Pruitt, and will hold Dr.

Pruitt's professional papers in an archive. In lieu of flowers, please consider a donation to the Dr. William O. Pruitt, Jr. Archival Fund at the University of Manitoba, 179 Extended Education Complex, Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2 or by calling (204) 474-9195 or 1-800-330-3066. A celebration of Bill Pruitt's life will take place at a later date. People who wish to be notified of the event please contact [pruittmemorialmeeting@shaw.ca](mailto:pruittmemorialmeeting@shaw.ca).