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DAVID F. PELLY

THE MAN

BEHIND THE WORDS

Above & Beyond, Canada's Arctic Journal just completed 15 years of publication. One consistent component of those years has been the regular contributions of David Pelly. Many across the North have shared their stories, first with David, and ultimately through him with our thousands of readers, in Canada and abroad. To celebrate the milestone marking 15 years of publication, *Above & Beyond* asked David Pelly to indulge us with his thoughts, reflecting on his lengthy career as a northern writer. *Tom Koelbel, Publisher*

A&B: How did your northern career begin? What brought you North in the first place?

DFP: My first trip north of sixty, in 1977, was a canoe trip on the Back River. We came North in search of a wilderness adventure. It was the early days for barren lands canoeing, before the boom of the 1980s. There were four of us on that trip – I was the only one that caught the bug. None of the others have ever returned. But I felt compelled to, and soon after, began looking for ways. I got my first magazine assignment in 1979. In 1982, at the end of another canoe trip, this time seven weeks on the Kazan River, I arrived in Baker Lake. That changed my life. For the first time, I began to integrate, to become part of a northern community. I spent most of the next few years there.

A&B: Why do you say that changed your life?

DFP: Well, I had no particular plan back then. People in Baker Lake befriended me, so I formed attachments. It's still where I have my closest ties in the North, even after all these years. In fact, people there put opportunities in front of me. Especially one

man, David Mannik, who is almost 90 now. He was my first teacher. I was a complete greenhorn, but he took me out on the land and showed me everything, looked after me. I didn't ask him to; he'd just invite me along when he went hunting, and I eagerly accepted. Looking back now, I realize how much I'm indebted to him, how patient and subtle he was with his teaching. I think we still have a special bond.

A&B: You are now entering your 16th year as a major contributor to *Above & Beyond*. Your material has covered a wide variety of subjects, ranging from geographic and historic, to the documentation and preservation of Inuit traditional knowledge. What challenges do you face in gathering your information?

DFP: I have to say two things. One, the North is a rich source of story material. And two, Inuit elders have been universally – without a single exception in my experience – enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge for publication. I can't tell you the number of times people have said "thank you" to me (and therefore to the magazine, I would add) for putting their story in print – I believe they see it as a way of

David, a man at home on the land, during a 1990 trip on the Kazan River.

passing on their knowledge to future generations. So it is not actually difficult to gather information for articles. The only real challenges stem from the vast distances and expense involved in travel to the sources. In pursuit of stories, I've done archival research, gone into the field with scientists, interviewed countless people from many walks of life, undertaken my own adventures, and so on, but the most significant sources have definitely been Inuit elders. It's been a real honour for me to be able to serve their interest in documenting their knowledge. I often find myself in the privileged position of being able to give voice to their stories, as they wish. It just happened to me last month: an elderly lady in Whale Cove handed me a sheath of papers on which she'd written down her story in syllabics. No doubt that story will appear in *Above & Beyond's* pages in the months ahead.

A&B: What triggered your interest in Inuit traditional knowledge?

DFP: Exposure, in a word. In 1983, a new friend in Baker Lake said to me out of the blue "You're a writer; will you help me with my book?" And so it began. Processes were much less formal or structured 20 years ago, and we didn't use the term "traditional knowledge," much less Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit [IQ],

David Mannik
and David Pelly,
1988.



but that's what we were documenting. I worked with Ruth Annaqtuusi Tulurialik, and some elders in Baker Lake, to produce the stories in *Qikaaluktut*, each one illustrated by one of Ruth's vivid drawings. It was a wonderful project, and it opened up my eyes to the vast resource of knowledge held by the elders. I've been working with them ever since.

A&B: You have written for us before about traditional knowledge and its use. Why do you think it has become such a political issue?

DFP: Yes, I have – it's a subject I've thought about, and care about, a lot. I'm not sure why it has been politicized. It's a most unfortunate development, truly a disservice to cultural preservation in my opinion. It's certainly not the elders' doing. I've never met an elder – and I've worked with hundreds – who did not want to have his/her stories recorded and disseminated. They see it, I believe, as a matter of survival for the knowledge. That's why you can hear elders on the radio every evening telling stories, anxious, it would appear, to put their stories out into the public domain. I think there is some confusion with the notion of appropriating the elders' collective voice, but that is an entirely different matter. What I'm talking about, engaged in, and supportive of, is the recording and publication of elders' stories with credit and acknowledgement. My book, *Sacred Hunt*, is a good example. That, it seems to me (and to them, I believe) is not only appropriate, it is a useful contribution.

By "traditional knowledge," in this context, I refer to the cultural or ethnographic information which elders have as a result of their life experience, knowledge which, while intrinsically precious, has no apparent commercial application. That's very different, for example, from the pharmaceutical knowledge of the indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest, who have had their "traditional knowledge" literally copied by drug companies who then make big profits with the synthetic versions of Amazonian natural medicines. There has actually been a lot of material recorded in the North. There's stuff all over the place: the CBC northern radio tapes, the old ICI material, various community projects large and small, individuals' work like mine, and so on. I'd say the priority Nunavut faces now is the preservation of all that material. It desperately needs to be collated, centrally catalogued into a territorial system, preserved, digitised.

A&B: Over the past 27 years, you've written several books, a few documentary films, and hundreds of magazine articles. To what do you attribute this obvious passion you have for writing about the North?

DFP: Funny you should ask! As you well know, one doesn't write for this magazine – or for many others for that matter – for the money! Oddly, there seems to be a myth out there that writers are "making money by selling people's stories" – I've actually heard those words, absurd though they are. It's not true, of course. First of all, writers are paid for the "wordsmithing,"

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the actual work of constructing a publishable piece, not for the information or story-content it contains – that’s an important distinction. Secondly, people would be shocked to learn how little income is generated from writing a non-fiction book, in most cases, and certainly in my experience. Measured in those terms, one might easily conclude that I’m wasting my time. I don’t feel that way, of course. But it is true that you have to find other income in order to support this writing habit.

On a personal level, I do this for the lifestyle and the experiences, not for the money. On the other hand, I’ve been lucky, as my involvement over many years with recording Inuit traditional knowledge has led to an amount of contract work all over Nunavut. There is a symbiotic relationship between that work and my writing, which both the informants and I find entirely appropriate.

As for the “passion” you refer to, I think it comes from two sources. One, I love being out on the land, especially the barren lands. They sustain me. It is where my spirit resides. Our family canoe trips every summer are – for Laurie and Ayalik and myself – our absolute favourite thing. The second source of “passion” is the gratitude expressed by people I meet everywhere I travel across the North. Oh sure, I’ve had detractors – every writer faces that – but 99.9 percent of the people I encounter, often total strangers, tell me how much they appreciate the material I write. What more could I ask for? If I am making a contribution in this way, however small, that’s the greatest satisfaction I could imagine.

My career has taken me to several parts of the world – southern Africa, the Caribbean, Japan, Iceland, the Orkney Islands, and so on – but the North is where my heart stays.

A&B: If we offered to republish one of your past features, which would you choose?

DFP: That’s a difficult question. There have been several articles of personal importance to me. And I’m aware which ones have stirred particular interest among readers. The story called “Going Home to Kutgajuk” (July/August 2000) continues to this day to engender positive comment – I think a lot of people could identify with the experience of the three men returning to their homeland, at the mouth of Simpson River. And, personally speaking, taking that trip with my old friend Nick Sikkuark (we met and became fast friends in 1982) and his brothers, at their invitation, was certainly a memorable and moving experience. I wouldn’t suggest you republish the story, but I would propose to write about our next visit – two of the brothers are talking of another return and have once again asked me to accompany them.

Another story that resulted in a lot of positive response was the one about the archaeological project at Iqaluktuuq, outside Cambridge Bay (March/April 2002). It showed readers the extent to which Inuit

elders can be integral to understanding the archaeology – a lot of people expressed pride in that fact, not only elders in Cambridge Bay, who certainly did, but also people in the farthest corners of Nunavut, to my surprise. I share that sentiment, in part because I was involved in initiating that project, but also as a general appraisal of the value of elders’ input. That perspective is surely a good development for Inuit culture and useful for archaeologists, so the benefits go far beyond the specific project described in the article. Apparently the article did a good job of explaining the history and the archaeology, judging by the feedback, so that is gratifying.



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On the lighter side, I think the article which produced the most response ever may be a piece I did about old-timers hockey, based on a tournament in Pelly Bay (now Kugaaruk) several years ago (Winter 1997). That one was simply a lot of fun.

A&B: We have to ask: is there any connection between your surname and the community of Pelly Bay (now Kugaaruk)?

DFP: I always squirm when I hear this question, which I’m often asked. The simple answer is yes. The background is this: Pelly Bay, Mt. Pelly (near Cambridge Bay), and Pelly Lake (on the Back River, north of Baker Lake), and several other northern landmarks, were all named after my great-great-great-grandfather, John Henry Pelly, who was the Governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company during 1822-52. That was a period of heightened British exploration in the Arctic, much of it stimulated in part by his personal interest and adventurous spirit. (By the time he was 30, he’d sailed around the world a couple of times as a sea captain.) So the explorers – Thomas Simpson, John Rae, George Back, and others – named prominent features after their patron. Those are the facts, but it certainly has nothing to do with my enduring interest in the North.

A&B: You’ve given lectures and mounted exhibits abroad, and made presentations aboard cruise ships, focused on the North, the land, its people and its history. Based on those experiences, how would you gauge the level of interest in our North, at home and abroad?

TOP: David with Nick Sikkuark, when they met in Baker Lake in 1982.

LEFT: David writing his journal during a barrenlands summer trip, 1991.

David working with Ruth Annaqtuusi Tulurialik, during the preparation of stories for the book, *Qikaaluktut*, 1985.



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projects. That's the joy of it. If I must pick one, I'd say it is the oral history and traditional knowledge project I'm doing with people – mostly in Baker Lake, Whale Cove and Rankin Inlet – focused on the Hanningayuq region of the Back River. There are about 25 elders left who were adults living in that area up to the time the caribou vanished and people starved, in the 1950s. We're recording their knowledge of the land and its resources, the legends, stories, and place names. Hanningayuq will be thoroughly documented and mapped when we're done. It's a project some Hanningayurmiut have wanted to do for years. I was delighted when they asked me to help them.

A&B: An unfair question now – are you working on another book and, if so, when might we expect to see it published?

DFP: Yes, there are a couple of new books percolating away slowly. With the exception of my first book, I have not initiated any of the book projects on which I've worked over the past 20 years, seven of them altogether. The ideas have been presented to me. That is the case for both of the books now on the horizon, but they are both a few years from publication.

A&B: Final thoughts?

DFP: Hmmmm. How did you talk me into this?! I'm generally a private person; I don't like the limelight. I'm sure glad I won't be travelling while this issue is in the seat pockets – it would be mortifyingly embarrassing.

A final thought? I'm grateful to the North. The land and the people have been generous to me and I hope I've found suitable ways through my work to give something back to both the land and the people. 

BELOW:
David Mannik, 1980s



David with his wife Laurie and their son Ayalik, during one of their annual canoe trips, 1999.



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