

TONY PENIKETT

HUNTING
the
NORTHERN
CHARACTER



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Purich Books, an imprint of UBC Press
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z2
www.purichbooks.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Penikett, Antony, author
Hunting the northern character / Tony Penikett.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-8000-8 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-8002-2 (PDF). –
ISBN 978-0-7748-8003-9 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-8004-6 (Kindle)

1. Canada, Northern – Politics and government.
2. Canada, Northern – Social conditions.
3. Canada, Northern – Environmental conditions. I. Title.

FC3956.P43 2017

971.9

C2017-903749-8

C2017-903750-1

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens
Set in Caslon, Univers, and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.
Substantive editor: Barbara Pulling
Copy editor: Matthew Kudelka
Proofreader: Kristy Lynn Hankewitz
Indexer: Pat Buchanan
Cover designer: Michel Vrana

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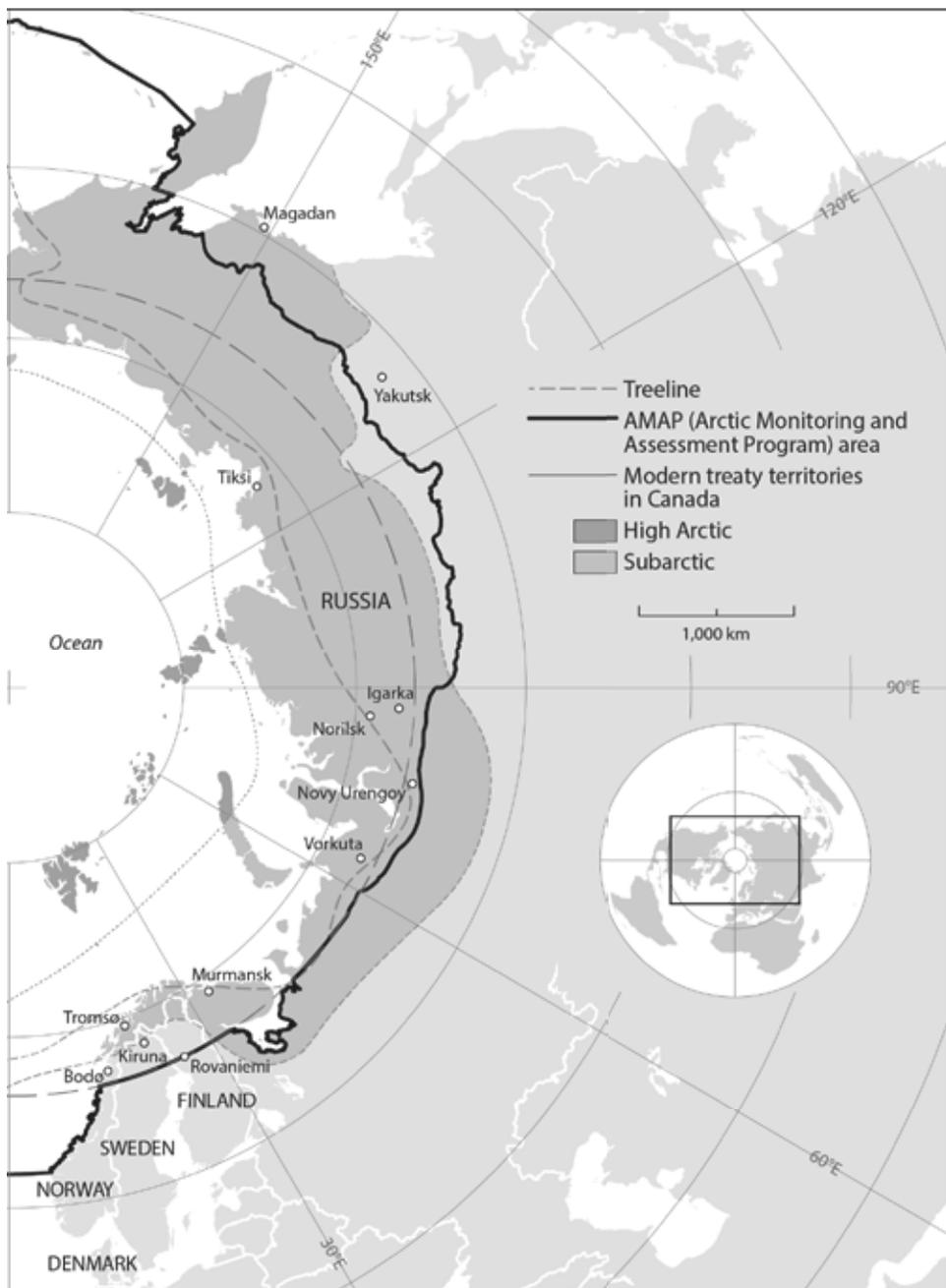
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Prologue

During his time in Ottawa as member of Parliament for the Northwest Territories, Wally Firth used to carry a compass in his pocket. Every so often during a political discussion, he would take it out and stare at it. When challenged to explain what he was doing, Firth would say, “Just checking to see which way is north.”

That love of his northern homeland, that deep sense of the North’s distinctiveness, was something Firth never failed to communicate. He understood very well that many of his southern counterparts saw the Arctic as barren and remote and empty. As Firth’s campaign manager for his upset win in 1972 (he was the first Indigenous politician from the North to gain a seat in the House of Commons), I learned much from him. Firth had little formal education, but in his forty years he had lived through enormous change. In his work as a trader for the Hudson’s Bay Company, as a radio “pronouncer” for the CBC, and as an organizer and pilot for the Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada, he had been a leader in many of those changes.

National leaders like to drone on about “the northern identity” and “the Arctic character,” but what exactly are they talking about? Over the past several generations, communities around the circumpolar North have undergone major transformations. Northern residents have lived through the Cold War, decades of Indigenous land rights struggles, the booms and busts of resource megaprojects, environmental and social

stress, and now, increasingly, the cruel consequences of climate change. The insecurities suffered by northern communities in the course of these changes far outweigh those experienced by their southern counterparts. At the same time, the decolonization processes also under way in the Arctic have been profoundly liberating.

Colonial mindsets have a long history. The Vikings on Greenland stabbed a “Skraeling” to see if the Inuk in question would bleed and prove himself human. In Russia, the oppression of Indigenous peoples – reindeer herders, hunters, and fishers – started centuries ago. During the Second World War and afterwards, nation-states moved Arctic Indigenous people around like pawns on a circumpolar chess board, forcing them off their lands, abusing their children in residential schools, and dragging them through years of grinding land and political rights negotiations. While all this was taking place, national governments aided outside developers in plundering northern resources.

Over the past four decades, land treaties and devolution agreements have localized the distribution of resource revenues, jobs, and business opportunities to some degree, but nation-states continue to control vast lands and the resources under northerners’ feet. Presidents, prime ministers, deputy ministers, and diplomats now appreciate that the Arctic is a contested space. Renewable resource harvesters in the North face conflicts with powerful non-renewable resource ventures from the south and, increasingly, overseas. For many Arctic residents, climate change is a raging ghost, chasing game off hunting grounds and unsettling community foundations. The absurdities of arbitrary colonial divisions have outlived the reality that thousands of mixed-race northerners and their blended families do not fit neatly into the federally created boxes of Indigenous and settler, Status and non-Status Indian, US-recognized tribal government and Alaska Native Corporation. Northern residents recognize that the Arctic is the site of fierce circumpolar geopolitics, but what they seek is to become masters in their own homes.

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, former president of Iceland, observes that it is in the federal states – the United States, Russia, Denmark, and

Canada – that capital cities exist at the greatest physical and psychological distance from the Arctic regions. Indeed, the Canadian government often seems baffled by the North; it has half a ministry for Indigenous Affairs and a second half for Northern (read “settler”) Affairs. Canadian prime ministers travel north often enough, but like most tourists, they prefer to make flying visits in the summer season. Barack Obama was the only sitting American president ever to visit Alaska. Nordic leaders live closer to the High North, but their Arctic citizens nevertheless question whether those leaders speak for them. Russia has invested heavily in its Arctic economy, but since the end of the Cold War, its northern population has been in sharp decline.

It astonishes northerners how little national capitals actually know about northern places and peoples. Everybody recognizes the American eagle, the Russian bear, and the Canadian beaver, but how well acquainted are southerners with symbols such as Alaska’s willow ptarmigan, Greenland’s left-handed polar bear, or the Nordic reindeer? South and North stand worlds apart.

Yet out of sight of New Yorkers, and far from the minds of Copenhagen’s citizens, Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders together are forging new Arctic realities. The often painful interactions among the three main actors – Indigenous villages, Arctic cities, and nation-states – have fundamentally altered the contours of the northern character.



My fascination with the North began as a child, when I received a little grey hardback called *Lars in Lapland* as a Christmas gift from my schoolteacher grandmother. The title page featured a line drawing of a little boy in Sámi costume and a reindeer with sleigh bells around its neck. This little book ever after pointed me northward.

Most writers on the North, even the excellent ones, approach the Arctic from a southern perspective, as outsiders looking in. In this book I aim to offer a northern perspective – not *the* Arctic view, but a view based on my own northern experience. After many years as a territorial legislator and later as a mediator, mentor, and negotiator dealing

with Indigenous and northern issues, I count myself as something of an insider. As well, like most northerners – or residents of any colony or peripheral area – I have often bristled at my status as an outsider, since residing in the North meant that I was far from the inner circles of policy-makers in Ottawa and Washington. In the words of the immortal science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, we existed in Terminus and they thrived in Trantor.

My links to northern lands go beyond my experiences in public life. They include an intricate web of family and personal relationships, ties knotted in my case through years of on-the-ground work in Alaska and all three Canadian territories: Yukon, the Northwest Territories (NWT), and Nunavut. Since that first childhood encounter with Lars and his reindeer, I have visited Lapland and met Sámi herders in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. In Alaska, the NWT, and Yukon, I have admired the reindeer's wild counterpart, the caribou. Once, along the Dempster Highway, I stood on a mountainside while hundreds of migrating members of the Porcupine Caribou Herd milled around me.

I have also learned practical lessons on more recent Arctic assignments: as a facilitator for the Arctic Governance Summit at Tromsø; as moderator for a Canada-UK Colloquium titled “The Arctic and Northern Dimensions of World Issues” at Iqaluit; as chair of the ten-year External Review Team for the University of the Arctic (UARctic); and as an adviser for the Arctic Security Project organized by the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. In the years since my time in government, I have had hundreds of conversations with other public policy practitioners in the eight Arctic states and beyond. All of these experiences have contributed to my education in Arctic issues.

During my years in and around the North, I have been lucky enough to see the advent of a new northern consciousness. I have witnessed – and sometimes participated in – Aboriginal rights struggles, ongoing devolution talks, and northerners' rising demands for a fair share of the benefits from northern resources. I have marked the growing recognition that Arctic communities are cornerstones of sovereignty and

security, and I have watched new forms of Arctic governance emerge, along with the fierce efforts of reactionaries to undo any steps towards modernity.

For some time, northern and Aboriginal communities have been pursuing their own foreign policies, with or without the sanction of national governments. Circumpolar initiatives have flourished, with conferences on everything from agriculture to education and health. Northerners are keen to strengthen east–west links that will counter the south’s domination, and new institutions reflect this growing feeling of community across the Far North. With a unique demographic that is half Indigenous and half non-Indigenous, northern Canada has been the primary laboratory for many reconciliation initiatives, including Aboriginal self-government, circle sentencing, consensus legislatures, wildlife co-management, and the blending of scientific and Indigenous knowledge.

But stereotypes persist. Many southerners still imagine the Arctic as they see it in the media. TV dramas can leave viewers with false impressions. Southern reporters flock to Indigenous villages to capture the “traditional” while ignoring the modern Arctic cities where most northerners live. “North Poll,” an *Up Here* magazine survey conducted in February 2011, found that a majority of Canadians believe penguins live in the Arctic and that people in the northern climes live in igloos.

People who should know better don’t help the situation. A Norwegian scientist declared at a meeting I attended in northern Finland that “Eskimos know nothing about polar bears.” A Finnish scholar informed me that he did not “believe in” traditional knowledge. A Swedish diplomat told an NWT Dene audience – one that included residential school survivors – that they should give up their Athabaskan tongues in favour of the universal language, English. Stories can define nations, but fiction cannot serve as the foundation for good public policy.

In my youth, the North listened while the South talked. To a large extent, through the efforts of northerners themselves, that has changed. The story I want to tell in this book is about an Arctic that Oslo, Ottawa, Moscow, and Washington often refuse to see. This is a book not about

northern stereotypes but about the events that have shaped and are reshaping the northern character in the twenty-first century. Here, in a hopeful account of accommodations between village chiefs and regional legislators and their prospects for reconciliation with nation-states, is my hunt for an Arctic identity the world does not yet know.





CONTOURS

1

Who, What, Where? *Arctic Peoples and Places*

*When tundra tourists wonder aloud if they are lost,
the guide grins. “No. We are here, right here.”*

Most politicians, like most citizens of the eight Arctic states – Canada, the United States, Norway, Finland, Russia, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Iceland, and Sweden – have never spent time in the Arctic. Instead, they base their impressions largely on mass media news reports or film and television entertainments. Misleading headlines tout an impending “Arctic Gold Rush” or a “New Cold War.” A survey conducted in 2015 by EKOS Research Associates found that the majority of Canadians believe that their country has military bases along the Northwest Passage and that there are roads connecting all Nunavut communities.¹ Who is planting such ideas in their heads?

The situation is the same south of the border. The vast majority of *New York Times* readers will never visit the Arctic. That stops them from appreciating how newspaper stories, even those filed by conscientious reporters, distort the northern character and landscape. On a broader scale, reportage about Indigenous land claims and climate change has etched pictures of the Arctic’s isolated villages and endangered wildlife onto the global consciousness. Yet even the sharpest of these images blur at the edges.

How do those who’ve never seen the Arctic envision its residents? Do they imagine Charlie Chaplin in “The Gold Rush”? Or the Kenidi family

from the CBC TV series *North of 60*? Each generation may favour a different hero, from Robert J. Flaherty's Nanook to the latter-day stars of the reality TV show *Ice Road Truckers*, but almost without exception, these iconic figures are the creations of southerners. As we now know, *Nanook of the North* was part documentary and part fiction, subject to the same manipulations applied by reality TV. Television series play out in thirty- or sixty-minute time slots, and political commentary is broadcast in ten- or twenty-second sound bites. But history, and life, unfold on an entirely different timetable.

Popular TV dramas such as the CBS series *Northern Exposure* and CBC's *Arctic Air* are full of distortions. Broadcast in the 1990s, *Northern Exposure* dramatized the cultural clashes between a transplanted New York physician and the quirky residents of a fictional Alaskan village. That show, filmed in Washington State, had a loyal following in the south, but many Alaskans disliked its false representations of their state. The jobs of the show's main characters, for example, contrasted sharply with the state's actual leading occupations as listed by the Alaskan Department of Labor in 2012: 10,000 cashiers, 6,000 office workers, and 5,000 employees, each in the construction labour, food service, and janitorial sectors. According to the department's statistics, only a few hundred people in Alaska still pursued the traditional primary occupations of fishing, forestry, and hunting and trapping. Similarly, Statistics Canada reported in 2012 that there were 10,000 public employees in the Northwest Territories, and the NWT private sector boasted comparable numbers of the kinds of jobs that are found in every southern town.²

Arctic Air was a short-lived series about bush pilots shot mainly in and around Vancouver. The series – “set” in Yellowknife, NWT – starred Indigenous heartthrob Adam Beach and attracted a million viewers in 2012. But no real bush airline operations could survive on *Arctic Air*'s diet of romance and adventure. Icelandic Canadian anthropologist and explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson used to quip that when it came to Arctic travel, “adventure was a sign of incompetence.”³ Aleqa Hammond, Greenland's former prime minister, echoes that thought: “Greenland has a small population of roughly 58,000 people, of which non-

Greenlanders or nonindigenous people are approximately 10,000. Our rate of growth is very low, and there is a reason for this. We live in the midst of the world's smartest animals – the polar bear and the Arctic fox. To live well, we exercise precaution, we plan our activities very carefully, in particular on stormy, snowy days, when we are immersed in darkness.⁷⁴

Countries reveal much about their cultures in the stories they tell about themselves, but stories about the northern regions by northerners have a hard time breaking into prime-time TV. My father was once a northern doctor, but he would not have recognized himself or his patients in *Northern Exposure*. Nor would my bush pilot brother, Stephen Penikett, have seen himself as a character in the Canadian TV drama *Arctic Air*. Steve led a life full of hard work, incident, and human tragedy. An aircraft maintenance engineer as well as a commercial pilot, he started flying the Arctic skies in his youth and went on to a legendary career that took him around the world.

It's not that the North lacks for beauty and drama, but neither is of the sort that translates into television entertainment. Steve once put me in the second seat for a Twin Otter trip along Canada's Arctic coast. We cruised for hours under the canopy of a perfect blue sky, over a landscape of endless white. Steve is gone now, and the endless white is going too. When a real bush pilot dies, there's no string-section soundtrack or slow fade to black. The last time I saw my youngest brother, he lay in a coma, hooked up to a battery of machines, one controlling his breathing, another monitoring his blood, a third draining fluid from his lungs. Steve loved machines, but he liked having them under *his* control. On October 2, 2013, a super-bug took Steve's life.

An alcohol-fuelled Sunday-afternoon farewell held in an airport hangar featured many tales about Steve the aviator. Steve's wife, Laura, now an Air Canada pilot, described how Steve had once talked her through a crash landing in Nanaimo from his seat in a Calgary bar, where he was "at lunch." A colleague recounted the story of a company aircraft leased to some Central American deadbeat. Journeying down to reclaim the plane, Steve – who detested time-wasting bureaucracy

– encountered nothing but official obstruction, so before dawn he climbed the airport's perimeter fence, fired up the plane and, below radar, flew it out of the country.

Rosemarie Kuptana, former president of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, wrote to me that she remembers Steve as the aviator who held up a scheduled flight so that a young Inuk, just off the jet from Edmonton, could make it home to Sachs Harbour for Christmas. Yukon flyer Rick Nielsen told me that he credits Steve for both the success and the explosive growth of Kenn Borek Air, arguably the most famous and best operator of Twin Otter “bush” aircraft in the world.

Handling 5 million passengers a year, the Anchorage airport is one of North America's busiest. Many Alaskans proudly carry private pilot's licences, but modern runways are hardly overwhelmed by bush pilots or fly-in doctors. Rather, thanks to late-twentieth-century land claims settlements, there is a whole new generation of northern airlines owned by the Arctic Aboriginal shareholders they serve: Air North, Canadian North, and First Air, to name a few.

Northerners, who survive by being flexible and adaptable, also strain the usual occupational and class categories. A union carpenter working on housing projects during the short summer construction season may, for the long winter months, become a cabinet-making entrepreneur. Many people work year-round at a variety of part-time jobs: as substitute teachers, contract researchers, children's piano instructors, desktop publishers. “Full employment” in Edmonton is not the same as being “fully employed” in Whitehorse. Any way you look at it, the Far North's managers, teachers, and social workers now outnumber the bush pilots and trappers. But it is hard to picture TV producers luring southern audiences with a TV series about territorial bureaucrats.

The cultural tensions between the metropolitan imagination and northern realities are rarely reported on. But what is the “true North”? For a start, in the twenty-first century, the Far North is melting ice, shifting ground, contested space. Romantic (and sometimes moronic) misrepresentations do more than just annoy northerners; they also

confound understanding between South and North. They divide national capitals and northern regions, and the remote recipients who feel the brunt of this top-down misinformation have few ways to correct the record.

Hapless media shaping means that harried policy-makers may frame issues to fit outdated images of the Arctic and its peoples. Spare the Arctic any political leader who models him or herself on historical figures such as Sam Steele, Bishop Stringer, or even Sir John Franklin, much less the fictional characters from Jack London's *White Fang* or John Wayne in *North to Alaska*. Such mythic Arctic headspaces are ungovernable. The true North has outlived and outgrown them. Political decisions about the Arctic in the next few decades will have repercussions well beyond Far North regions, growing to encompass the whole world. So it is essential that fact- and science-based policies and Indigenous local knowledge underpin the decisions governments make, not fable or fantasy.⁵

The need for clarity of vision has never been greater. In *The World in 2050*, UCLA geographer Laurence C. Smith posits that four global forces – demography, resource demands, globalization, and climate change – will dramatically alter the statistics of Arctic populations in the twenty-first century. Smith argues that these four global pressures will transform the northern quarter of our planet, making it a place of greater human activity, strategic value, and economic importance. He projects population increases of 76 million people for Nordic and North American countries, with most of the growth concentrated in the United States and Canada.⁶ He predicts that the eight nations of the Arctic Rim will grow prosperous and powerful, while the equatorial world will suffer water and energy shortages, combined with crowded cities. No one knows if Smith's predictions will come to pass, but in the face of great change, northerners and southerners alike will need to get to know the North better. Northerners know their homelands better than anyone, of course, but the pace of change in the Arctic and Subarctic demands lifelong learning and relearning.

Then

The North opened up for me as a young man with a move south from Dawson City to Whitehorse in 1970. In May of that year, I showed Dick North, an Alaskan journalist, the storyboards for a film I fancied making, and Dick shared with me his own notes on the story of the so-called Mad Trapper. During ten August days at my family's cabin on the North Fork of the Klondike River, I wrote the first draft of a Mad Trapper screenplay. After we handed the draft to a typist, Dick proposed that we celebrate over a beer in Dawson's Downtown Hotel. "One beer," I agreed.

As we stumbled out of the bar at 2:00 a.m., Dick suddenly remembered that he'd once met a film producer from London, England, and from a phone booth near the Midnight Sun Café, he called David Cobham. We caught Cobham on a rare day at the office. Dick pitched him hard: "I've got this kid here with a script, and I want to put him on a plane to London."

The posh but polite tones of Cobham's reply had a sobering effect: "Dick, Dick, send the script if you must, but I beg you, please, do *not* send the kid."

Around the same time, the managers at a nearby asbestos mine declared my labour surplus to their needs – a decision I suspect was linked to my energy as a union shop steward. The miners responded by nominating me to run for a seat in Yukon's territorial legislature. So after my night on the town with Dick North, I flew not to London but to Old Crow, Yukon's northernmost community, for a day of campaigning for the forthcoming election. I'd planned to fly back that evening, but a snowstorm blew up and kept me in the Gwich'in community for the best part of a week.

I arrived back in Dawson on Election Day, September 8, 1970. My brother Steve met me at the airport and handed over an airmail letter, which I pocketed until after the polls had closed. Alone that night at my "victory headquarters," I opened the letter. David Cobham had written to say that he liked my script, and he offered to meet me at a Montreal hotel on October 5 to negotiate a contract – as it turned out, against a

backdrop of Canadian soldiers patrolling the streets in response to Quebec's October Crisis.

Upon my return to Yukon, facing the unemployment line, I packed my bags and decamped for Whitehorse, where the manager of the Travelodge, spotting me hanging out in the lobby, offered me \$2 an hour to fill in for a missing front desk clerk. At 4:00 p.m., when it became clear that the evening clerk had also blown his shift, the manager asked me to stay another eight hours. I worked there for two years but was allowed an hour off every day for my part-time job as the host of a talk radio show on local station CKRW.

One evening in 1972, Wally Firth, a Métis bush pilot who was involved in organizing Native groups north of 60, including the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories (later the Dene Nation), the Yukon Native Brotherhood, and the Yukon Association of Non-Status Indians, stopped by my post at the Travelodge for a chat. He asked if I would be his campaign manager.

“What are you running for?”

“The NWT seat in parliament.”

“Which party?”

“NDP,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied, and handed in my notice to the Travelodge.

A few days later, I stopped in for a drink at Whitehorse's Gold Nugget Lounge. Whitehorse is a capital city, but it is also a small town, and the politically active people all know one another. As my eyes adjusted to the dark of the bar, Erik Nielsen, Yukon's veteran Conservative MP, waved me over. After introducing me to his companion, Bud Orange, the retiring Liberal MP for the NWT, Nielsen casually asked me, “How would you like to manage my campaign?”

“Sorry, I'm going over the mountains to work for Wally Firth,” I told him.

Orange laughed. “Native people will never vote for one of their own,” he advised.

Firth and I moved into our headquarters, a fur warehouse in Yellowknife's Old Town, and got to work. Firth had an American Express card,

and I had a Visa. Over the next few weeks, both cards were seriously overused. At the time, the NWT was the largest riding in Canada: 2.1 million square kilometres, with few roads. While Firth flew his borrowed Cessna from community to community, gathering crowds outside co-op stores by playing his fiddle and telling a political story or two, his team of canvassers knocked on doors in Fort Smith, Hay River, Inuvik, Pine Point, and Yellowknife. Firth and his crew campaigned against the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, arguing that the project should be put on hold until northern land claims were settled. My steelworkers' union was a financial supporter of Firth's campaign, as were other unions. First Nations activists, public servants, and teachers came out in numbers to support the cause.

For me, the worst moment came in the final week of the campaign at a Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce all-candidates debate, when the moderator asked Firth his views on the "money supply" question. The Liberal candidate, a Harvard-trained economist, had been eloquent on M1, the metric for a nation's supply of cash, chequing, and deposit accounts. The Tory candidate also acquitted himself well enough. But Firth seemed stumped.

"Mr. Firth," the moderator intoned.

I was listening to CBC Radio's coverage of the debate as I drove around Yellowknife, checking campaign sign locations. In the silence that followed the moderator's question, I parked the pickup truck and held my breath.

"Mr. Firth," the moderator pressed.

As Wally's silence continued, I died a little.

The moderator raised his voice. "How would you handle that one, Mr. Firth?"

After a beat, Wally replied, "I could just about handle that ... with a shovel." And the crowd roared. Firth won the seat handily, and the Liberals, returned to government with a slim minority, soon after appointed Judge Thomas Berger to hold an inquiry into the Mackenzie Valley pipeline project.

That year on Boxing Day, BBC TV aired *The Mad Trapper*. It was not a great movie, but the residuals kept me in coffee money for years. I went back to hunting for votes after the federal election, knocking on doors by the thousand in Whitehorse and across the Yukon Territory, this time on my own behalf. I eventually won election to City Council and then, for five terms, to the Territorial Legislature as the NDP MLA for Whitehorse West. I went on to serve two terms as premier of the territory and, later, once I moved south, seven years as a provincial public servant.

Now

The script I'd written for *The Mad Trapper* was a mostly true story about the biggest manhunt in northern history. In 1932, the RCMP, aided by two-way radio and aircraft, chased an outlaw from the Rat River across the mountains to the Eagle River, Yukon, where he died in a shootout with the police. The exact nature of his crimes, the accuracy of the "Mad Trapper" diagnosis, and even the man's name ... all remain a mystery. I've long had this nameless anti-hero in the back of my mind.

In "The Spell of the Yukon," Robert Service wrote that the value of the Klondike's gold lay not in the hoarding of bullion but in the finding of it. The *hunt* was the thing. During the 1960s, young Yukoners looked for "gold" in all the wrong places: asbestos mines, copper mines, silver, zinc, and lead mines. Mining booms are like sugar highs; they inevitably lead to excruciating busts. Before a miner could even make his stake, the mine in question might close, and there was no alchemy in the mined-out ghost towns, which even by then outnumbered Yukon's living communities.

Service's truth also holds for Yukon's second industry, the trapping of tourists. In the 1960s and '70s, a Dawson City hotel bar was *the* place to make a deal or find a job. When a miner drank too much, it was often the hotelier's job to pack him off to a room where he could sleep until the morning after. There was a time when tourists came north to Alaska

and Yukon seeking the land of Robert Service, Jack London, and Pierre Berton. Nowadays, they come to see the Arctic environment and encounter Indigenous cultures. Huge tour companies own many northern hotels, luring clients from around the world and keeping them captive on company boats and buses and in company restaurants.

Highway hunting is a long-honoured local tradition in the North. Many of the moose and caribou harvested in the territory in fact die mere metres from the willow ditches and dusty shoulders of Yukon's excellent roads. A number of these kills should, strictly speaking, count as accidents or vehicular slaughter, since no firearm was involved, but the Yukon hunter does not normally brag about putting "road kill" on the supper table, so the published data may not be reliable. In any event, the hunter in question might not have been actively hunting at the time. Moose seldom signal before crossing the road, and if they cross on the opening day of hunting season, what can a trucker do? In another scenario, a highway hunter may have been looking for a moose, but, coming round a bend, found a bull caribou browsing by a culvert. A driver dreaming of moose stew or caribou ribs might run smack into a grouse or a ptarmigan instead. Indigenous hunters, who have no truck with romantic European notions about "big game," the conquest of nature, or the glorious chase, are likely to accept the highway hunt as something more analogous to shopping for groceries at a convenience store: at odd hours, you take what you can get.

Setting aside government neglect, mass media astigmatism, and the myopia of the Arctic states – each tends to view its own northern region as *the* Arctic – let it be said that northerners are prone to a blinkered vision of themselves. How well do they know themselves? Sometimes northerners get snared in historical traps of their own making.irate citizens once threatened to lynch a Whitehorse editorialist for criticizing the Sourdough Rendezvous' can-can dancers, beloved champions of Yukon's Gold Rush heritage. It took Carolyn Anne Moore, a young scholar, to remind everyone that the Klondike's can-can dancers were launched by a government tourism campaign in the 1960s. They were artifacts of modern marketing, not Yukon history.⁷

In another instance, while Yukon legislators were debating a wolf cull program, a self-identified “Aboriginal traditional knowledge” expert went on the radio to demand a return to the “traditional” practice of invading wolf dens to sever cubs’ tails for the handsome bounty the government paid in the 1950s. Sam Johnston, Tlingit chief and speaker of the Yukon Legislature, was appalled. Tlingit law and tradition prohibited the killing of the young of any species, Johnston protested – especially for money.

Once upon a time, much of the non-Indigenous world regarded the Arctic as a frozen wasteland. The 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) report shocked that world into recognizing the Arctic as a rapidly changing environment, as well as a place of increasing political significance.⁸ The Arctic landscape has lately suffered major disruptions, including shoreline erosion from winter storms, infrastructure upheavals from permafrost melts, and surprising wildlife dislocations. As the polar ice cap melts, the Arctic has become strategically important, and great powers and global corporations are now casting a covetous eye on the Arctic’s previously inaccessible natural resources.

The imminent arrival of this latest rush of gold seekers and oil drillers, with their promises of jobs and business opportunities, often heightens local fears of social disruption and environmental degradation. Summer tourists in growing numbers cruise the Arctic coastline, bus the highways, and hike mountain trails. Beyond the competing narratives of southern scientists, media centres, and northern storytellers, in the contested spaces of today’s Arctic, one hears a multitude of voices: of villagers and city dwellers, land stewards and mine managers, hungry people and contented bureaucrats, those who have come for the boom times and those who stay on through the busts. In the hunt for the northern character, all of these voices must be considered.

Where

Bullish North American politicians have expanded the area considered to be the Arctic. Under the terms of the 1984 Arctic Research and Policy

Act (ARPA), US government leaders had Arctic Alaska take in all of the United States' Bering Sea. The Canadian government's Arctic covers everything above the 60th parallel, in particular Yukon, the NWT, and Nunavut. However, this framework is problematic, since the 60th parallel demarcation excludes Nunavik, Quebec, and Churchill, Manitoba; both are Inuit homelands and polar bear habitats.⁹ This boundary also misses many communities in the northernmost areas of Canadian provinces that are far more remote and poorly served than their territorial counterparts.

When nationalists throughout the polar region worry about sovereignty, border disputes, and land boundaries, they sometimes overlook one fact: the Arctic is mainly a marine area, with the Arctic Ocean at its centre. According to geographers, the region encompasses the polar area north of the Arctic Circle at 66°33'39"N. Climatologists focus on the highest latitudes, where summer temperatures never rise above 10 degrees Celsius. Scientists argue over whether the Arctic's southern boundary should be based on the southernmost extent of permafrost, the northern treeline, or the distribution of flora and fauna.¹⁰

Even Indigenous peoples do not all agree about Arctic boundaries. Inuit, who generally live north of the treeline, consider themselves a unique Arctic people and may accord Subarctic status to their Dene neighbours, who dwell to the south of that line, along with thousands of non-Indigenous northerners. Yet because the treeline crosses the NWT in a northwesterly direction, there are deep-rooted Dene communities living north of the Arctic Circle and Inuit villages lying to the south of it.

Residents of the circumpolar North often use the terms *Arctic*, *Far North*, and *High North* interchangeably. This comes simply from feeling at home in the entire region. For northerners who feel ignored and disrespected by distant governments, it is empowering to embrace a distinct regional identity, one shared with the Arctic areas of other nation-states. When northerners transit from the Subarctic to the Arctic, they cross an invisible line, one that most hardly notice, if they notice it at all. For all the flaws of official designations, northerners have come

to accept the political boundaries of the Arctic United States (Alaska) and Arctic Canada (the three northern territories). Rovaniemi may not look like a southerner's idea of an Arctic community, but as the capital of Finnish Lapland it counts as one. Tromsø was once a fishing village; now it is home to the Arctic University of Norway.

Who

Indigenous Peoples

First and foremost, the Arctic remains the homeland of ancient Indigenous nations, whose cultures and political systems have, to varying degrees, survived the arrival of colonizing powers and the subdividing of their traditional territories. In Alaska and northern Canada, these include the Inuit (a word meaning “people”) and the Athabaskans (also known as Dene, or “people”); in Scandinavia, Sámi fishers and reindeer herders; in Greenland, Inuit fishers and hunters; and in Russia, numerous distinct Aboriginal communities. Nowhere else in North America or Europe do Indigenous people play such pivotal roles in the economic and political life of their regions. Remarkably, these Arctic peoples thrived for centuries in one of the planet's harshest environments. The Dene, Inuit, and Sámi languages survived even the imposition of alien education systems and remain vital elements of their people's cultural lives.

Inheritors of what anthropologists describe as Thule culture, the Inuit migrated across the Arctic from western Alaska around 1,000 CE. In Nunavut, 84 percent of the population is Inuit, with a median age of 24.7 years.¹¹ The Dene have lived in the Far North of the North American continent for thousands of years. They live mainly to the south of the Inuit and are members of the Athabaskan language group, the largest Indigenous linguistic family in North America; thirty-two Athabaskan dialects and languages are still in use in Alaska, Yukon, and the NWT, as well as in the northern communities in Canada's four western provinces.

Most northern Canadian communities have fewer than 500 residents, reflecting the tendency of Indigenous populations to treasure traditional

village life. Villagers may not feel completely at home in the region's cities, with the result that town-and-country tensions have added to the predictable political conflicts between settler cities and Indigenous villages. Another hard truth is that the national capitals of the Arctic federal states exist at alienating physical and psychological distances from many Arctic communities, large and small. In recent years, Arctic voices have started to talk back to the southern centres of power, and it is largely Indigenous village voices that have caught the southern public's ear.

The Arctic's ancient societies deserve their reputation for astonishing resilience, especially in the face of new insecurities: global warming, globalization, and resource extraction booms and busts. Over the past few years, Arctic Indigenous peoples' struggles have caught the attention of world media, and the resulting headlines have helped deliver remarkable political change. Yet their newly won media attention and political power cannot disguise the fact that Indigenous people now constitute a minority of the Arctic's population.

Settlers

The Arctic Human Development Reports (AHDR) detail demographic data for the populations of the circumpolar regions. Its first edition, in 2004, neatly distinguished between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, and the 2015 report found that more than 85 percent of current Arctic residents are settlers.

Many settlers come north looking for work and plan to leave once they have built their "stake." Others have lived in the North for generations. Thanks to the presence of substantial mixed-race populations across the Far North, northerners – a category that includes *all* northern residents, whether Aboriginal or settler – may view the Indigenous/settler differentiation as somewhat muddy. Also, data collectors sometimes include transient workers in their population counts. That said, the North has plenty of long-term residents who initially planned to stay only one summer. The Alaska Constitution expressly promotes settlement and settlers: "It is the policy of the State to encourage the

settlement of its land and the development of its resources by making them available for maximum use consistent with the public interest.”¹²

In the Whitehorse coffee shops of my youth, local sages mocked CBC North reporters who fed stories to the national news about colourful local characters, grizzled prospectors, mad trappers, and high-kicking can-can dancers in a bid for permanent network jobs. Southern reporters often forgo the banalities of small Arctic cities, with their brand-name retailers and fast-food outlets, for the supposedly exotic charms of isolated Indigenous communities. Yukoners may joke about the “northern colour” items on the national news, but they are not amused. Blinkered thinking has caused most reporters to miss one very important story: for four decades, while the forces of climate change and globalization have raged around them, leaders and legislators from Indigenous *and* settler communities in the North have been designing and redesigning Arctic institutions to radically transform the architecture of Arctic governance.

However long they peer at the tiny black dots representing settlements on maps of the “great white North,” southerners might be surprised to hear that most northerners live in cities. Almost half of the Canadian Far North’s 107,000 residents live in two urban centres, Whitehorse (pop. 27,889 in 2013) and Yellowknife (pop. 19,234 in 2011). Both Alaska and the Russian Arctic boast cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants, although the populations of Murmansk and Anchorage, which are full of working-age adults, rise and fall with resource booms and busts. Murmansk, the Arctic’s largest city, is Russia’s far northern ice-free port for fishing, naval, and merchant fleets. A metropolis of deteriorating Stalin-era apartment blocks, Murmansk suffered a post-Soviet population drop from 500,000 in the 1980s to 300,000 in 2015, although energy developments and increases in Arctic shipping have recently revived its boomtown status.¹³ Anchorage is home to more than 300,000 people, which is 40 percent of Alaska’s population, and 60 percent of Iceland’s inhabitants live in and around Reykjavik (pop. 199,289 in 2012). Iqaluit in Nunavut and Nuuk in Greenland are relatively large population

centres, as are Fairbanks, Juneau, Kiruna, Norilsk, Rovaniemi, and Tromsø.

Nation-States

Each Arctic state has its own distinct characteristics; that said, the Arctic nations have found common environmental, social, and scientific interests. In 1996 those common interests led to the creation of the Arctic Council, first proposed by Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney in a speech in Saint Petersburg in 1989. The eight Arctic states are full members of the Arctic Council. Under an innovative international arrangement, six Indigenous peoples' organizations have also joined the Arctic Council as "Permanent Participants."

Canada's legendary northern-ness may largely be a deliberately constructed self-image. Even though 40 percent of the country's land mass lies in the Arctic and Subarctic regions, 75 percent of Canadians live within a few kilometres of the US border.¹⁴ Canada has the second-longest Arctic coastline after Russia, yet it has no Arctic port, having sold the Port of Churchill to private American interests in 1997. The new owners are now selling the port to a consortium of First Nations.¹⁵ The Canadian government's Arctic policy, which is currently under review, includes a five-point strategy: exercise Arctic sovereignty; protect the region's environmental heritage; improve and devolve Northern governance; conduct world-leading Arctic science and technology; and help the North realize its true potential as a healthy, prosperous, and secure region.¹⁶

When it purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867 for \$7.2 million, the United States became an Arctic nation. Alaska achieved statehood in 1959 and by 2013 had a population of 740,000. The state is rich in energy resources, and its beautiful wilderness attracts shiploads of cruise passengers every summer. As a result of their 1971 land claims settlement, Alaskan Native peoples are now the state's largest private landowners. In his Arctic policy, former US president Barack Obama made it clear that Alaska was important to national security, but also that his