# Remembering Aron

## *Julie Cruikshank*

Of the many stories I remember when I think of Aron, my favourite is a travel tale. It dates to early days of our friendship, perhaps 1980, shortly after Aron began teaching in Whitehorse. The Yukon College we now know was still far in the future and Aron taught his classes in riverside trailers near the old vocational school.

At the time, I was working with Yukon First Nation elders recording oral histories for their families and communities. One day, I asked Aron if he would like to accompany me to visit Angela Sidney, a well-known elder storyteller living in Tagish, and he agreed with characteristic enthusiasm. We drove to her home and spent a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon visiting and talking about her memories. Angela was fascinated with Aron's towering height and quizzed him about himself and his family. Before long, Aron, Elaine, Ben, and later Peter were dropping by her house whenever they passed Tagish, and their friendship grew.

Some months later, Aron contacted me about an upcoming conference on narrative at the University of British Columbia. He planned to attend and suggested that Angela and I consider going to talk about our work. We were enthusiastic—Angela always loved travel—and some months later we three boarded a plane to Vancouver. Once we were airborne, Angela regaled us with stories about her first trip south one summer in the late 1960s, also to Vancouver, and her astonishment as a life-long Yukoner that there were places where the night sky darkened in midsummer.

Our time at the conference was a great pleasure. I had made plans to stay on for a few days and waved Aron and Angela goodbye as they set off together on their trip home. The rest of this story I heard often from both of them—each outdoing the other with fresh details.

In those days, direct flights from Vancouver to Whitehorse were non-existent and Aron was pleased that this return flight had a scheduled plane change in Prince George, his home town. He judged that they had ample time to exit the plane, grab a taxi, and ride to visit his sister for an hour. Angela was thrilled by this plan! Meeting the families of her young friends was always important to her. She described Aron's sister's delight when they arrived, her generous hospitality, their reluctant departure as plane-time approached, and their speedy drive back to the airport. And they each described how, as they stepped from the car, they watched together as their plane rose into the

sky and headed north—without them. Aron allowed that he had perhaps miscalculated departure time. Then, as each recalled, they looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and agreed with mischievous delight that there was nothing to do except to return to his sister's and continue their visit. A day later, they resumed their voyage on the next plane, but for both of them, and for me—their perfect audience—this was the highlight of the entire trip.

Aron and Angela remained fast friends and he was among the proud observers years later when Yukon College opened, and she was there to give it an official name, Ayamdigut "it got up and walked away." The name, she said, referred to the college's relocation from its original site. But privately she said it also reminded her of exotic travels with Aron—"just like that time the plane took off and left Aron and me behind." Vancouver, September 13, 2005

*Julie Cruikshank is professor emerita at University of British Columbia and was Aron's colleague from 1980–84 during Yukon College's formative years.*

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## *Ken Coates*

It is easy to recall memories of Aron Senkpiel: tall, lanky, strong-minded, friendly, excitable, passionate about the North. I met and worked with Aron many times over the years—we were, with Norm Easton, the founding editors of the *Northern Review*—and I remember countless discussions about post-secondary education in the North, northern-centred research, the development of Yukon College, and the University of the Arctic. It might be odd, then, to select as my most memorable encounter with Aron as being our meeting in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, thousands of miles away from his beloved Yukon.

The 1990 meeting of the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand (ACSANZ) was held in Armidale. I was in Australia on a five-month research trip, working out of the North Australia Research Unit in Darwin, and had been asked to speak about my comparative research on northern Canada and northern Australia. When the program for the conference arrived, I was delighted to discover that Aron would be presenting a paper as well.

Perhaps we should not have been surprised that the good Canadian Studies folks in Australia and New Zealand had other preoccupations than northern Canadian realities. The program itself was full of papers on French Canadian literature and there seemed to be a particular enthusiasm that year for the recent writings of Margaret Atwood. Historians were few and far between; northern specialists numbered a grand total of two. Our sessions were not particularly well-attended. I think my paper attracted four visitors

and Aron's one or two more; in both cases, conference organizers appeared to have recruited several last-minute volunteers to give the impression of some semblance of interest in our contributions.

The fact that we were outliers at the conference made it easy to spend a lot of time together—that, and the simple matter that our hotel was quite some distance away from the conference venue. Walking to and from the university gave ample time to talk. Aron was at a very reflective point in his life, increasingly interested in his fiction writing, wondering what he would do next professionally, and having a prolonged debate with himself about staying in the Yukon.

Aron seemed seriously conflicted about his life. He wanted to write—poetry, non-fiction, and commentaries on northern education—but he was also passionately committed to Yukon College and academic administration. He adored the Yukon, as all who know Aron understood, but he had been toying with the possibility of moving to senior administrative jobs in the south. That was, after all, the most logical career path for him and people were after him to apply for important positions at southern colleges. And he wrestled, in particular, with what was best for his wife and sons, trying as he always did to mesh his personal aspirations with his unrelenting love for his family. The conference sessions only added to the uncertainty. He was deeply disappointed that the Canadian Studies crowd was not more interested in northern Canada (Australians were not much interested in their outback, so the experience did not surprise me as much) and was upset about the shallowness and lack of a connection to reality in many of the papers. He knew that he had things to say about matters academic and he had a sense, not boastful but realistic, that he could make important scholarly contributions.

And so, for three days, the two of us from the Yukon wandered around Armidale and the conference venue, musing about matters Northern and personal ambitions. I had never before had as much time to talk to Aron and learned a great deal about his state of mind from his discussions about the conflicts and contradictions raging inside him. Scholar or administrator? Northerner or academic migrant? Poet and fiction writer or analyst of matters academic? Aron, of course, was always all of these. He never did leave the North, although he had opportunities to do so. And he continued to write and think about a wide range of topics and issues, and put more stock in his writings than most people understood. I have many fond memories of Aron, but this one—his uncertainty—stands out. Yet he was uncertain only because he knew his options and because he cared so very much about so many different parts of his life. To listen to Aron rail against the injustices of northern life, and to then have him switch to poetic reflections on why the North meant so much to

him, was to begin to understand the enormous passion and commitment that underlay everything Aron did.

I do not know if Aron made any final decisions about his life's trajectory while in Armidale. I do believe that the distance from Whitehorse and the Yukon and the opportunity to reflect on what was truly important to him helped him define that which was most valuable to him: wife and family, the Yukon, academic administration, and scholarly engagement, in precisely that order. Sometimes you have to leave home to truly understand where home is—that was certainly the impression I had from my time with Aron in New South Wales.

*Ken Coates is professor of history and dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo.*

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## *Eve D'Aeth*

Hello Aron: Your passion for "getting it right" has infected me to the point of paralysis. I've brooded a long time over this farewell, and I'm not sure if it's right even now. Even now, so many years after our last meeting, I sense you as I change a tense or snip three unnecessary words out of a piece of writing. Brows raised, eyes a few inches from the paper, you skitter up and down it: nailing an imperfection here, catching a special cadence or shade of meaning there, seeking out a phrase that you repeat with pleasure, looking up from the page, measuring the sounds to give each its full weight and significance.

Your eagerness. It encompassed more than words and sounds. You had an almost childlike delight in themes of adventure and exploration, even when you deconstructed them to expose exploitative roots. Exploration was one of the points where representations on paper met and joined with geographical realities and the realities of muscular exertion, sensations of heat, cold and fatigue, hunger and thirst. Your glee at your hiking adventures, your edgy delight at encounters with bears, your pride in being a contributor to *Canadian Geographic* (quite different in quality from your response to the publication of your works of scholarship).

How many schemes and projects, essays and theses, poems and careers took heart and direction on the Senkpiel deck or in front of the fire? I remember the start of one project in particular. We sat out on the deck in the late summer, talking of crossbills and pine grosbeaks, the difficulties of getting to Herschel Island, potholes and campsites along the Dempster, bear stories and other stories, and in the midst of these the idea formed that finally metamorphosed into a completed work.

I see you looking towards Grey Mountain from Liard Avenue: "There's nothing between here and the Arctic Ocean."

You look North as constantly as a compass needle.

I'd lived in Yellowknife and Whitehorse nearly all of my life as a Canadian. My idea of my North was encompassed by what I knew of fellow northerners, and my view of Canadians from elsewhere was encapsulated by the story of a colleague, a teacher, who, on a flight from Ottawa to Edmonton, was asked by a Canadian to explain the location of the Northwest Territories. He said, "You know where Alaska is on the map? Good. If you move right from there you come to the Yukon. Move further right and you hit the Northwest Territories. That's where I live, and yes, I am Canadian."

It was you, leading me to explore the idea of North, who awoke my awareness of its significance to the rest of Canada and so added a dimension to what I know of Canada as a whole.

The North is always with us. Last week as my boots crashed through last fall's dead leaves (oak, hickory, beech), they crunched on the ice beneath. There you were again, ice under the leaves.

Fare well.

*Eve D'Aeth taught in South Africa and in the Northwest Territories before becoming an English instructor at Yukon College. She currently lives and writes in Kingston, Ontario.*

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## *Lise Farynowski*

I first met Aron Senkpiel in 1987 when I was seventeen and in my final semester at F.H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse. By the time he died on 28 February 2003, I had known him nearly half my life.

In the intervening sixteen years I had the privilege of knowing Aron from the perspective of a student, a friend, and fellow hiker. From the day I met him, he was my mentor and advisor.

I had never expected to pursue any sort of post-secondary education in the Yukon—my sights were set on larger, urban centres of academic repute. Until I met Aron, I was convinced that a Yukon education was inferior and certainly only for those who failed to be accepted elsewhere.

Aron played a significant part in enticing me to Yukon College. There, I ended up taking my first year of fully-transferable university courses at 1000 Lewes Boulevard before later transferring to the University of British Columbia and obtaining a Bachelor of Music.

I am thankful for the time I spent at Yukon College throughout the years. As both my academic advisor and English instructor, Aron was the most dedicated and inspiring professors that I have had. I am also privileged to have witnessed the transformation of the Arts and Science Division at Yukon College from its humble beginnings to the sophisticated entity that it now is.

Like many others, I have been fortunate to benefit from the hard work and vision of Aron and his colleagues. Through the college I have been able to study and work in Finland, complete a diploma in northern studies, and obtain a master's degree in public administration from the University of Alaska Southeast. I have also gained valuable work experience.

Aron gave me my first real job and one that I am still proud of—editorial assistant for the *Northern Review*. I was still a teenager at the time, and I have to admit at first I found it puzzling that anyone could get so excited about the North that they would dedicate the time and energy to creating a journal about it. However, I soon caught Aron's infectious interest in all things Circumpolar.

Throughout the years, Aron had an unfailing amount of time to provide advice, write letters of recommendation, draw my attention to opportunities, help me get something published, or just take ten minutes from his day to e-mail or chat or read snippets of poetry or text from whatever he was reading at the time.

For all the times I tried to thank Aron for his help, he refused to take credit for anything special. Each time he merely said: I am just doing my job. This is what I am paid to do. This is what I do for all students.

Those words still echo within me, and my reply today would be, "If you were just doing your job, then you set the gold standard."

Aron turned his position at Yukon College into something extraordinary. He was instrumental in transforming post-secondary education in the Circumpolar North into what it is today: accessible, scholarly, and internationally renowned. This is his legacy and I am proud to have been there to witness it.

*Lise Farynowski was a participant in the North Consortium Student Mobility pilot project, where she studied at the Arctic Centre in Finland and also worked for the Circumpolar Universities Association. She has published several articles on circumpolar issues and is currently a senior policy advisor with the Government of Yukon.*

## *Scott Gilbert*

Many of Aron's friends will remember that he loved getting outdoors to hike, birdwatch, or explore different corners of the Yukon. When I first met Aron, I was living in Kluane and this gave us lots of "ground" to cover in our hallway meetings at Yukon College. He often had stories of his hiking adventures whether it was deer tracks in the snow on the trails behind his house in Riverdale, or birds along the Dempster.

One of my first jobs at the college was to organize a field course destined for the Aishihik Lake area. Students and I spent three weeks in the area and one of our activities was a backpacking trip from Aishihik Village to Sekulmun Lake. We had a great time and our bedraggled column of hikers was plodding back to Aishihik on a Sunday morning when Aron (and a group of friends) surprised us around a corner of the trail. We stopped for a brief visit and then continued on our way. As Aron disappeared down the trail I had more than a few afterthoughts—had he come all that way just to check up on me? As I got to know Aron better those doubts disappeared. You never knew where he might turn up.

Aron's fondness for the outdoors was matched by his interest in ideas and he joined many others in 1993 at a forum on northern protected areas and wilderness held at the college. The two of us took part in a workshop on science and ethics and our group was soon sidetracked by a discussion of wilderness. Someone made the point that managers might have to restrict the number of people visiting a wilderness area to protect its "wilderness" character. Aron agreed with that premise but told us his notion of wilderness was an area that you could travel in without any permits or regulation. Many in the crowd nodded agreement with Aron. Then he asked how many in the audience would value a wilderness area so highly that they would be willing to forgo visiting the area to ensure preservation of the wild? As I recall, this ethical challenge left most of us stumped—there was no easy answer to Aron's insightful question.

*Scott Gilbert is coordinator/instructor of the Renewable Resources Management Program at Yukon College.*

## *Outi Snellman*

"Two worlds meeting and never touching"—that was Aron's famous Circumpolar Hug. Somehow everything seemed to be about the challenge and possibility of the physical realities of distance.

He had such a funny concept of space and distance. Aron loved walking; he was always planning one big walk or another. But you really needed to know him quite well to understand the meaning behind his virtual walks: he would walk in the bush around Whitehorse every day, note down the distance, and then mark the same distance on a map of the Appalachian Trail. He never quite got to complete his virtual walk of the Trail. On his real walks, he used to measure and record in his journal—nice little drawings, even—bear and moose droppings. I once asked why, but I do not think he knew the response himself. It was just "fascinating stuff."

I first got to know Aron in 1992 at the Third Circumpolar Universities Cooperation Conference in Rovaniemi, Finland; I was responsible for the organization. I did not really have much time for being social during the actual conference, but on the final evening, during the closing dinner, I felt I was able to relax a little. I was sitting opposite Peter Adams and next to Aron, who somehow made it their mutual responsibility to make me laugh. I did, and we all concluded how nice it would be to work together. I still remember Aron's comment about the relentlessness of geography—how on earth would working together be possible, it was two separate worlds. But even then, there was that twinkle of challenge in his eyes: beaten paths are for beaten men.

When the European Commission and the Canadian Government announced the first call for proposals in the EC-Canada Cooperation Program in 1995, I got a surprising phone call from Yukon College. It was Aron, inviting me to start putting together a proposal. Yukon did not even have e-mail at that time, so the fact that we did get the proposal together in record time was no mean feat. The fact that the project, the North Consortium, was among the six first projects funded from the EC-Canada Program, was quite something. Aron believed in the relentlessness of geography, but would never give in to it easily. That project really changed the destinies of many young northerners and, I firmly believe, also the realities of geography for some northern peripheral regions and their institutions for higher learning.

Therefore, it was no longer such a surprise when I got a fax from Whitehorse only days after the idea of a University of the Arctic had been brought up by David Stone, Bill Heal, Lars-Otto Ryersen, and Lars Erik Liljelund, in a meeting of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program in northern Norway in March 1997. The fax, from Aron of course, was simple: "Outi, to quote Paul Simon: 'Let's get together and call ourselves an institute.'" Ironic in Aron's

style, of course, but half serious—perhaps we could really do this.

Aron was not so convinced that it could be done, if the Circumpolar World ever could work as one, but he firmly believed that it should be done. Whatever he did, he did with his whole heart, and he really gave the University of the Arctic and its Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies (now called the Circumpolar Studies Program) his everything.

But he never stopped laughing, and making all of us laugh. That is an important legacy; just as important as a North that is just a little closer to being one North, not only many Norths.

*Outi Snellman is director of administration and university relations at the University of the Arctic and has headed the UArctic International Secretariat in Rovaniemi, Finland since its establishment.*

## *Ted Lambert*

In the early 1980s the Yukon was a place where, if you wanted to learn about the North, you had three options. You could visit with elders, sourdoughs, and read local lore. You could research historical information on your topic of choice at the Yukon Archives. Or you could attend classes in any number of academic institutions Outside (as we call any place other than the Yukon). But, oddly enough, you couldn't learn much of anything in an academic setting in the Yukon.

Then along came Aron Senkpiel. He was just another academic dude from the south, most people thought. He'll do his thing, set up the teacher training programs he was asked to set up for the Yukon Vocational and Technical Training Centre, and be on his merry way. Not so. Aron was not content to see so many research efforts and publications take place about the North, with little or no resident legacy. Nor was he satisfied with the fact that northerners were not involved in the teaching and learning process of things Northern. So he set about to change all that.

Aron's vision, his dream, was that there would be research, teaching, and learning done "in the North, for the North, by the North." He coined the phrase. He relentlessly pursued his dream with whomever would listen. This was not always an easy task. In the end, Aron's determination paid off. With the official re-designation of the vocational centre to Yukon College in 1983, Aron had the opportunity to lead the charge to patriate northern knowledge. He was always careful, though, to acknowledge, celebrate, and take full advantage of the vast expertise to be found Outside. He just wanted to make sure that expertise was shared, and eventually developed by northerners. So became the Northern Studies Program at Yukon College. The rest is history.

Aron was a man with a vision, who had the determination and resolve to get the job done. He did just that. His legacy has far outweighed his own opinion of himself, but to many he was a giant force in the development of the North, and that fact will never be forgotten.

*Ted Lambert was an associate of Aron's at the Yukon Vocational and Technical Training Centre/Yukon College throughout most of Aron's career there. He fondly remembers Aron as a close friend, a passionate and caring educator, and most of all, a giving, gentle, and humble soul.*