

Geoffrey R. Weller, 1942-2000

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It was with great sadness that the northern studies community received the news of the death of Dr. Geoffrey R. Weller, the founding president of University of Northern British Columbia, in Prince George, on July 22nd, after a short illness, at the age of fifty-eight.

Geoff Weller was born in England in January 1942, and grew up in Tonbridge, in Kent. He finished his high school education as an exchange student in Ann Arbor Michigan in 1961, and then studied Economics and Political Science at the University of Hull, UK, at McMaster University in Hamilton Ontario, and at McGill University in Montreal. In 1999 he was awarded an honorary PhD from the University of Lapland, Finland.

Dr. Weller began his teaching career at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec in 1965, and in 1971 moved to Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, where he spent the next nineteen years, rising through the ranks from Assistant Professor to Vice-President Academic, a position he held until coming to Prince George six years later.

At Lakehead he was responsible for a number of innovations in northern studies, particularly the establishment of the Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies and the Association of Circumpolar Universities, which was his particular pride. This group brought together scholars and administrators from universities in Canada, Alaska, the Nordic countries, and Russia to discuss matters of scholarly and other interest. The first meeting was held in Thunder Bay in 1991, and a more recent meeting took place a few years ago in Prince George.

Because of his administrative experience and his focus on northern studies, he was a logical choice to be the founding president of the new University of Northern British Columbia. He was appointed in the fall of 1990, and arrived the first week of January 1991, stepping off the plane to a temperature of -50°. Resisting any temptation to get right back on the plane, he stayed and took immediate charge of planning for the new institution.

The next four years were busy and turbulent ones. A site had to be selected, a campus designed, an academic plan drawn up, a number of competing interests dealt with, a faculty and administrative staff hired, and a huge number of other problems resolved. Working with the Interim Governing Council, the original body appointed to oversee the beginnings of the university, and with a small staff, Geoff worked out the

master plan for UNBC. He was largely responsible for setting out the five major themes of the university—environment, northern studies, First Nations studies, women’s studies, international studies—and for seeing that the Prince George campus, which cost over \$100 million, was built on time and according to plan. At the same time he fulfilled the aspirations of those northern residents who had fought to see the university established, by founding campuses in the Peace district, Quesnel, Terrace, and Prince Rupert, as well as a highly successful campus in the Nass Valley, in cooperation with the Nisga’a First Nations. He worked with the noted Haida artist Bill Reid in establishing an endowment fund to carry forward Reid’s legacy through the training and education of talented First Nations artists.

In August 1994 Dr. Weller proudly welcomed Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth to open the new campus, and classes began in the new buildings the next month. By 1995, when he stepped down as President to devote himself to teaching and scholarship, UNBC had a faculty complement numbering more than 100, a large and skilled staff, a beautiful campus in Prince George, partnership arrangements with all the northern colleges and many foreign universities, an extensive regional program of course offerings, a detailed academic plan and an impressive range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

If this were not enough, he continued throughout this period to make presentations at academic conferences and to publish scholarly papers. His main fields of interest were northern development, particularly in health and education, international relations in northern Europe and the Pacific, and more recently the field of international security. He never stopped learning, questioning, and publishing.

Geoff was a good natured, even tempered man, who retained his composure even under the heavy stress of forming a new institution from the ground up. He was tolerant, perhaps even to a fault, of those who disagreed with him and worked against his ideas. He had a wicked sense of humour which in private moments he used to entertain friends and colleagues, and which relieved some of the terrific tensions of his job.

During his last illness, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the University of Northern British Columbia was a success. With 3300 students, its enrolment was growing, and its future assured. Its graduates were going on to rewarding careers or further education, its faculty winning research grants at an enviable rate, and its rating across Canada was not only high, but rising. It may truly be said of Geoffrey Weller, as it was once said of the architect Sir Christopher Wren, *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*—if you would see his monument, look about you.

He is survived by Jean, his wife of thirty-seven years, his father, three sons—Duncan, Eric, and Alex—and one grandson. A private funeral service will be held in Prince George, and a public memorial service on Saturday, September 9th, 2000.