

# BURNT SNOW

MY YEARS LIVING & WORKING WITH THE DENE  
OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES





ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-309-8 [trade paperback]

ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-356-2 [trade hardcover]

ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-265-7 [epub]

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## **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Title: Burnt snow : my years, living & working with the Dene of the Northwest Territories /  
Kieran Moore.

Names: Moore, Kieran, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200172816 | Canadiana (ebook)

20200172905 | ISBN 9780888393098

(softcover) | ISBN 9780888393562 (hardback) | ISBN 9780888392657 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Moore, Kieran. | LCSH: Indigenous peoples—Northwest Territories—Social  
life and customs—20th century. | LCSH: Moore, Kieran—Friends and associates. | CSH:

Northwest Territories— Social conditions—1945-1999. | LCGFT: Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC E99.C59 M66 2020 | DDC 971.9/203092—dc23

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Printed in the USA

PRODUCTION & DESIGN: M. Lamont & L. Raingam

EDITOR: D. MARTENS

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and of the Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

*Hancock House gratefully acknowledges the Halkomelem Speaking Peoples whose unceded traditional territories our offices reside upon*

Published simultaneously in Canada and the United States by

### **HANCOCK HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD.**

19313 Zero Avenue, Surrey, B.C. Canada V3Z 9R9

#104-4550 Birch Bay-Lynden Rd, Blaine, WA, U.S.A. 98230-9436

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# BURNT SNOW

MY YEARS, LIVING & WORKING WITH THE  
DENE OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

KIERAN MOORE







For my grandsons, Nakaiya and Jerhyn, also to my daughter Teya and son Braeden, in the hope that these stories will give them an understanding of the richness of the Dene culture that is part of their background and of the role it played in my life.

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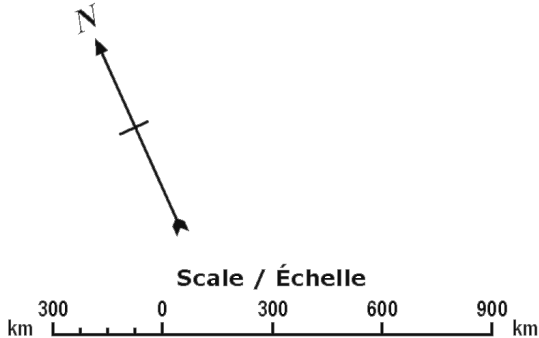
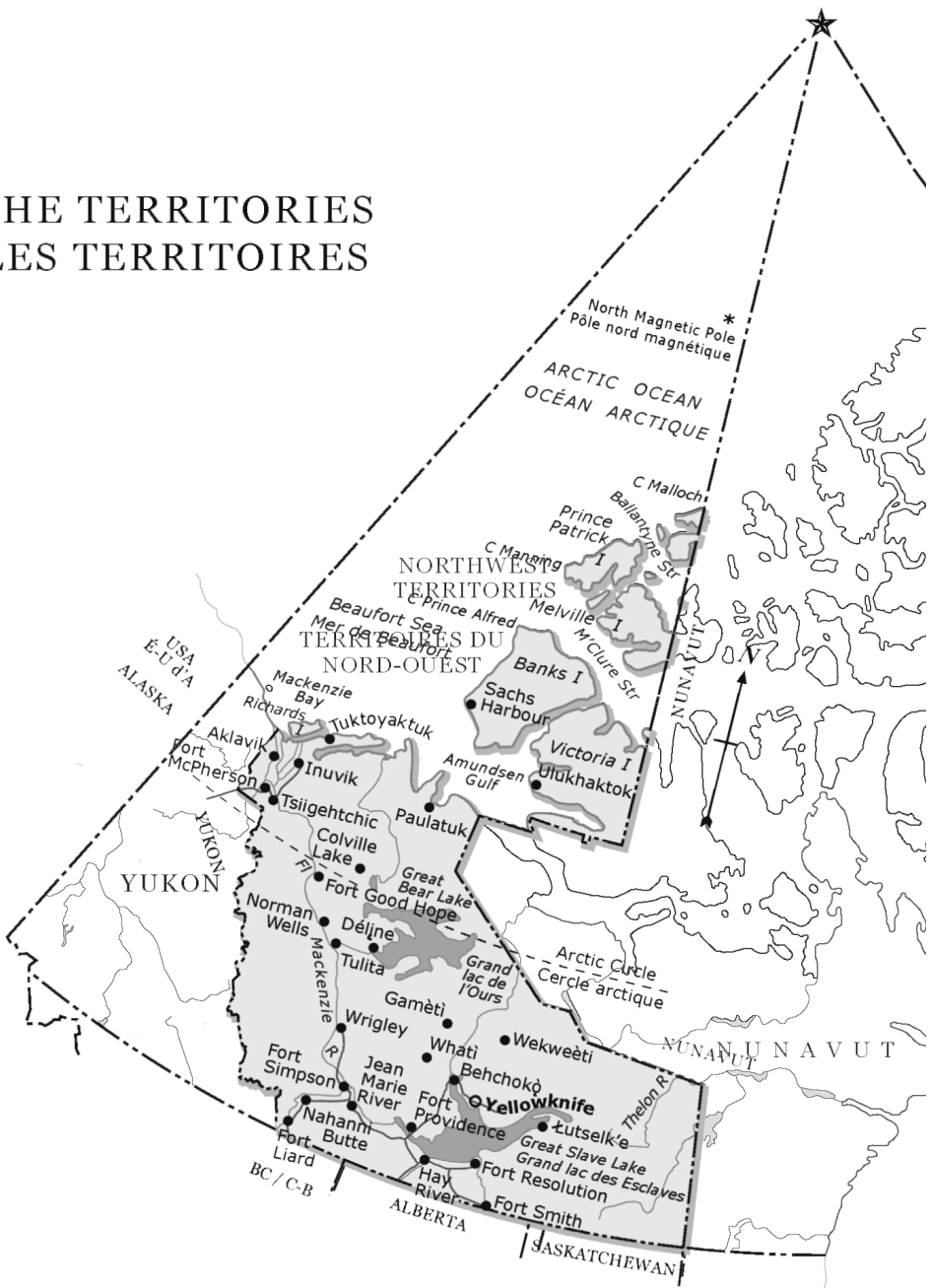
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# THE TERRITORIES LES TERRITOIRES



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# INTRODUCTION

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The stories in this book begin in the early 1970s, when I was twenty years of age and facing impending layoffs at my construction job in Winnipeg. I was frustrated at the instability and purposelessness of my life at the time and, consequently, decided to head into the Northwest Territories in the hope of finding purpose and direction for myself there.

After a short time working in the Yellowknife area, I was asked to build a church in the Dene community of Rae Lakes, the Dene being one of the Indigenous groups that inhabit the northern boreal and Arctic region of Canada. That assignment led to my immersion in the world of the Dene throughout the 1970s and early '80s.

It was a time of dramatic change for their communities. I was a witness to both the richness of their traditional ways and to the confusion and suffering they were undergoing as the old ways came under threat from colonialism.

The tradition of storytelling was an integral part of the Dene way, and I learned a great deal by listening and sharing in that tradition. The stories I tell here reflect the level of my personal engagement with them. These stories are told in the spirit of the storytelling tradition of the Dene and that of my Irish ancestors.

Rae Lakes (Gamèti), and a little later Fort Franklin (Deline) were the jumping-off points for me. The elders I met in these communities were strong in their adherence to traditional ways and little influenced by outside forces. They were my teachers. They held fast to their traditions and legends and invited me to share in their storytelling culture. These individuals, male and female, fed my insatiable curiosity and welcomed me as one of their own.

Had I arrived in these communities ten years later, many of the enriching

experiences I had would not have been available to me. I had the opportunity to participate in one of the last of a tradition of dog-sled hunting expeditions into the Barrenlands. That hunt served as a rite of passage for their young men, and it certainly served that purpose for me.

My travels in the region surrounding Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake led me into the heart of the traditional Dene world. There, I bonded with community members, elders, chiefs and medicine men. I worked alongside, ate, danced and hunted with them. One of the oldest of the elders, Bruno Mantla, took me under his wing when he saw my inquisitiveness and willingness to learn their ways. He saw something in me that prompted him to stop calling me by my name, Kieran, and instead referred to me as, Bruno sechi, or Bruno's younger brother.

Whatever strength of character I had when I arrived in Dene territory as a rudderless young man was enriched by my integration into the Dene world. In particular, I learned never to give up on whatever I set out to do, no matter how difficult the challenge. I learned, like the Dene, to persevere against great odds.

With the example they set, the challenges shared and the support provided, I found that sense of purpose I came north to find. I formed lifelong relationships with many of the Dene I met and who appear in my stories. I treasure the memory of those times we spent together and celebrate that connection in this book.

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## HEADING TO THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

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I left Winnipeg in my beat-up Land Rover on the morning of the first of January, 1971. It was the first step on a journey I was undertaking to find myself somewhere in the remote reaches of the Northwest Territories.

The highway I chose to follow north was represented by a yellow line on a map mounted on the wall of my bedroom in Winnipeg, a line that led me into the NWT on my third day on the road.

I made one stop outside Hay River, at a Renewable Resources office, and told them that I was looking for work. I was advised that everything in the area was shut down for the winter and that I should go back to where I came from. This was not the answer I was hoping to hear after travelling 2,500 kilometres. However, I continued on.

I stopped in Enterprise to get gas and talked to the owner of the restaurant there, Bernie's Steak House. I asked Bernie if he thought I might find work farther north.

"What kind of work are you looking for?" he asked.

"A job maybe building log buildings."

"Do you know how to build log buildings?"

"No," I replied, "but I learn fast." He laughed at that.

"Don't waste your time; you've no idea what you're talking about. There aren't any logs big enough to build anything where you're headed. I'd advise you to go back to where you came from." More of the same advice. He was just being realistic and laughed at this young greenhorn with dreams of building log cabins as a career. Interestingly, I met this man close to ten

years later, and we had a good laugh recalling that first meeting.

It was January 5, and a blizzard was blowing in close to -40C conditions as I got back on the road at about the 250-mile mark when I had my first sighting of a dog team in motion. They were travelling on a trail that intersected with the road and I watched in awe. It instantly reminded me of the time my grade 7 teacher asked me, what I wanted to do when I grow up and I answered "I want to deliver mail by dog team". This was the beginning of what I was looking for and, to my young eyes, a symbolic image of the true north. Little did I know that I would travel this trail to a Dogrib cabin named Blackduck Camp on frequent occasions a number of years later.

I was running low on gas, having trouble staying awake, and began to hit the snow banks along the sides of the road from time to time. I took a turnoff to find a place to rest and ended up at what looked like a large turnabout. I dropped into a deep sleep.

I didn't run the vehicle during the night, for fear of running out of gas. When I woke up, I got out and cranked up the engine, got it going and sat back in the driver's seat wrapped in my sleeping bag, waiting for the frosted window to clear up. When I next looked up, I saw that I was parked in the middle of a graveyard. I knew I must be close to Yellowknife because I remember thinking: When you're near the dead, it's a sure sign there's life nearby.

I left the graveyard, rounded a corner a mile away and descended into a beautiful valley with a small lake surrounded by Precambrian granite outcrops. It was a clear day, and in the distance I saw tall office buildings as the town arose like magic out of the wilderness. I felt warm satisfaction at having made it to this famous outpost of the north, Yellowknife.

I gassed up, ate breakfast at the Gold Range Restaurant and asked where I could find cheap lodging in town. They sent me next door to the Evergreen Hotel. It was cheap lodging and a welcome change from the cab of my truck. I washed up in the sink, fell into bed and slept. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, I was awakened by a loud banging on my door. I opened it to a bearded, professorial-looking man.

"Do you own the Land Rover outside?" he bellowed out.

“Yes.”

“Welcome to Yellowknife. You’re now officially a member of the Yellowknife Land Rover Club.” I told him what I was doing in Yellowknife and asked how many members were in the club.

“Three, and you makes it four.” Then he surprised me. “How about joining me and my family for supper tonight?” he asked. I accepted his invitation and shared a beautiful meal in the company of a local family who lived in the city that was to play such a large part in my future. I couldn’t have asked for a warmer down-home welcome.



(Tjaart) Tom Dornbross  
- credit - N.W.T. Archive/ McCall family



## TOM DORNBROSS

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I was in Yellowknife, looking for work, had a room, and was high in spirits—but low on money. I went to the library in the basement of the town hall, a warm place to hang around for a while. There were many empty chairs at the tables spread around the room. I picked a place to sit, hung my coat on the back of the chair, and was about to go looking for a book.

“Please move your stuff to another table,” said the librarian. I looked around the empty room and was somewhat puzzled.

“Why?” I asked.

“There’s a man who comes here every morning and he uses that chair.”

“But there are dozens of other empty chairs around,” I muttered.

“Suit yourself!” she said and walked away. I was disturbed by this curt exchange and so I decided not to move, got some books and sat down. An old man using a walking stick came down the stairs, walked up to my table, looked at the librarian and then looked at me. With one swipe of his walking stick, he sent everything I had put on the table tumbling to the floor. I got out of my chair to pick things up. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing as he calmly took my place at the table and began to read his newspaper. I gathered up my stuff with as much dignity as the situation allowed and located the librarian.

“What was that all about?” I asked politely.

“Old Tom’s an icon in the community, one of the first people to come to Yellowknife when it was just a tent city,” she replied conclusively. I later found out that he was an immigrant from Holland and, while he never worked in the mines, he hauled water to the mine workers in pails hanging from a wooden yoke straddling his shoulders. The mine workers didn’t want

to take the time to cut through five-foot-thick ice to get water for cooking and washing, and consequently they depended on him. He performed this task for them for years and was rumored to have invested his money in properties in the area and become a rich man. Well, as fate would have it, that very same day I went to the local coffee shop. I hadn't been sitting for more than a few minutes when the owner asked me to move to another chair.

"Why?" I asked for the second time that day. He pointed at the doorway as Tom walked in. I moved right then and there, knowing the consequences of crossing this old-timer. Sure enough, he sat down in the chair I had occupied and ordered hot water. They gave it to him, along with an empty bowl. He poured the hot water into the bowl, took some ketchup packages from their container and emptied them into the bowl. He then crushed crackers into it, making his own tomato soup. He left without paying for anything. I checked with the owner.

"We've watched him do this for years. He's a town father, one of the oldest of the old-timers. Look up there on the wall—that's a picture of him from the old days." There on the wall was a picture inscribed with the name Tom Dornbross. It was a picture of him as a much younger man. He never married; had no friends to speak of, but he obviously commanded respect in town. My first impression had been that he behaved like a miserable old coot.

I was dissatisfied with bunkhouse living in Yellowknife and wanted a place of my own. I searched around the town and found a number of old abandoned buildings I thought might serve my purposes. I went to city hall to make enquiries in the Land Titles Department and was told that the buildings belonged to Tom Dornbross, my old nemesis.

I tried to find Tom. It was strange that everyone knew of him but no one knew where he lived. It took me two days to find that he had moved into the old folks' home. I located the place and knocked on his door. He opened it, looked at me and immediately slammed the door in my face. I knocked again and talked loudly to him through the door, thinking he might be partially deaf. He opened the door once again and gave me a chance to ask him about the properties. He denied owning any of the houses I was interested in renting and told me to go away. I left, but, being stubborn by nature, I took another tack.

---

I had heard that if a person did not pay their taxes on a piece of property and someone stepped in and paid them, then the properties would automatically be transferred to the person who paid the taxes. Even though I didn't verify the rumour, I went to the city hall offices to try my luck. I located the property department, spoke to the person behind the counter and told them I was willing to pay the taxes on a particular abandoned property. The secretary took the file to the town manager. A few more people were called in and they discussed the problem and said it was decided that they would not tell me how much was owed by way of taxes. It appeared that old Tom had the town's support, even though he had not paid his taxes.

I left the office still determined to get one of these houses, which could more accurately be described as shacks. I went back to Tom's place the next day and knocked on the door, which was ajar, but there was no answer. I peered in and talked loudly into the dark. There was a light on in a hallway off the room. I entered cautiously. There, in the middle of the room, were two neatly stacked piles of paper maybe three feet high. I called out Tom's name, and he appeared in a bathrobe and looked me in the eye.

"You again!" he exclaimed. He held up a sheet of paper in his hand. "Do you know what that is?" he asked rhetorically as he carefully oriented the page to place it on top of one of the stacks. "These are the stock exchange reports; I have to watch them closely. Somewhere in this pile there's a record of some stocks I bought in a company when it first started and the shares were just pennies at the time. You have to keep on top of these things. What do you want this time?" he asked.

I talked about the weather and other non-threatening things while trying to make heads or tails of the man and win his favour in the hope that he would rent one of his shacks to me. He didn't throw me out right away this time. He was actually sharing the moment with me. When I asked if he had any shacks for sale, he said he was not interested in selling any property, so that was the end of that; it was the last time I was to meet with him.

10 years later Tom died, I'm told, they tracked down a relative in Holland who inherited whatever he owned. Any discussion of the old days in Yellowknife would, in all likelihood, involve a reference to Tom with his yoke and two water pails. Everyone knew of him, but no one knew him.

# WORKING AT THE GOLD MINE

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I did some enquiring around Yellowknife and was told that the only place where work was available throughout the winter was at the mine. Reluctantly, I went to the head office of Giant Mines, a local goldmine, thinking I was scraping bottom to come all this way to end up working in a hole in the ground. I approached the mine's front office desk and asked if they were hiring.

"No," the lady behind the counter replied. "The mine cuts back in the winter. We'll be rehiring in March and April. If you're still around, we might find something for you." I sat back on the bench, looking in my wallet to see if I had enough to buy lunch. Then I remembered the business card I had been given by my former boss in Winnipeg. I pulled it out and read the note he had scribbled on the back of it.

"This guy is a real hustler," it read. So I approached the secretary with it.

"Would you give this card to the mine manager please?" She looked it over and saw what was written on it and smiled.

"What the heck, it's probably a waste of time, but okay, I'll do that." A minute or so passed and a man came out of the office area and, holding my card out, introduced himself and asked: "Who wrote this note on the card?"

"My boss." I replied.

"If I call him right now, will he vouch for what it says?" he asked.

"Call him." I said. Instead of doing that, he invited me into his office. He obviously took me at my word. We sat down and he asked me a question right off the top.

"Can you work in the cold?" he asked. I told him about my trip by way of an answer.

---

“You have a job, and you’ve got a week to prove yourself. The secretary will give you a bunkhouse key. You start tomorrow, and she’ll show you where the cafeteria is.” I picked up the key, and as I headed for the door, the office secretary looked at me and shook her head.

“Congratulations,” she said with smile.

The next day I went to the carpentry shop, where I was introduced to a crew of carpenters and labourers from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The shop foreman was a Scotsman, the lead carpenter a Yugoslav and the workers in the timber shop were of Italian, Ukrainian and Chipewyan background. Here I was, about to add my Irish immigrant status to the mix.

At the mine, I became very good friends with two Indigenous workers, an Inuk named Lucky Dillon and a Yellowknife from N’Dilo, Philip Liske. They both worked in the mill at the most dangerous and unhealthy job there. The place they spent most of their working time was a glassed-in workroom called the Cottrell. They had to don special equipment before entering the room. Their job was to shovel arsenic out of bags into a vat. Toxic arsenic dust floated about in there, thick and heavy. Lucky and Philip were the only ones doing this work at the time I was there.

Philip told me the foreman arranged the shifts in the Cottrell so that when he and Lucky showed up for work they were scheduled to work there. Like many workers at the mine, they never argued about their assignment. They were just happy to have a paying job and didn’t seem to consider the possible long-range consequences. This amounted to a form of exploitation of the Indigenous workers at the mine. I didn’t realize the full implications of this advantage-taking practice, since this was my first brush with the darker side of life for the Indigenous people of the NWT.

When Lucky wasn’t in the Cottrell, he worked at the blacksmith shop, where they fashioned special tools required at the mine and repaired tools. The blacksmith was an elderly Ukrainian immigrant who was a marvel to watch as he worked. I sat with him one evening in the bunkhouse, and he told me what a natural Lucky was as a smithy. He had never before met anyone who mastered the trade with such ease.

“All these skills that took me years to learn, Lucky grasps right away, but it’s leading nowhere. It’s a dying trade,” he said with deep regret.

Lucky, Philip and I wandered the mine site in summer on one of our days off. They took me along the same path that the smoke from the stack took as it drifted with the prevailing winds. We came to a crystal-clear lake and went for a swim. I opened my eyes underwater and there was not a living thing in the lake. I got out wondering why a lake like this was not posted as being polluted. It didn't look polluted, but it certainly must have been. There wasn't a visible living organism in it. It wasn't a place in which I would swim again. Lucky, foolhardy as usual, swam in it to his heart's content.

In a very short time, I found that my comfort level was greater when I interacted with individuals from the Indigenous community. Those I met felt more like kindred spirits to me. Over time, these connections led to my involvement in a world and culture significantly different from that of my home community of Winnipeg. I didn't know it at the time, but I was entering that Indigenous world as it was undergoing one of the most significant transformations in the NWT since the years of first contact with the settler community.

Phillip, Lucky and I eventually went our separate ways. Philip became a game warden in Yellowknife and, as of 2004, was not showing any ill effects from his exposure to the arsenic. Lucky went back to Inuvik and, sadly died.

## FOUNDING OF RAE LAKES: GAMÈTI

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In early spring, I left Yellowknife after the breakup of a personal relationship. My truck was out of commission, and on impulse I hitchhiked on the dusty, gravel road leading to Fort Rae. I wandered into the town chapel there and sat quietly in a pew, feeling depressed and very much alone. A short while later, a priest came in. He approached me and asked if I needed to talk. I nodded, so he invited me to his office, where, without much urging, I explained my personal situation and how meaningless my life appeared to be.

“So why did you come up north?” he asked.

“To find a job in the bush and hopefully to do something purposeful.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, building things maybe!”

“Tell me a bit more about yourself,” he said. I told him that I worked at the mine and hated the work there and knew I needed to do something different. I added that my truck had broken down and consequently couldn’t go elsewhere to find work. He listened patiently and then summed up what I had told him.

“You like the bush. You’re a carpenter in need of work. You want to help people. That’s very interesting.” What he went on to say floored me. “It just so happens that I got a call from the bishop telling me that our priest carpenter, who was getting ready to build a church, had an accident and cut two of his fingers off. I’ve been asked to find someone who could take his place and do the job. It doesn’t pay much, and the location is a fly-in community, so no need for a truck. Do you want the job?” he asked.

“I’ll do it for nothing. When do you need me?” I blurted out, flabbergasted.

“Tomorrow,” he replied. “Get your belongings and go to the floatplane base in Yellowknife. The flight carrying the building materials leaves tomorrow for Rae Lakes. You’ll take Father Duchassois’ seat on that flight.”

I can’t remember how I got back to Yellowknife from Fort Rae, but I do remember how excited I was at the prospect of having my first experience of travelling by bush plane and looking forward to whatever came my way. I had no idea that I was about to take a flight into a future that would push me to my personal limits.

The following day, I got my toolbox and packsack to the float plane base, where a plane was sitting on the ice in the process of being loaded. There I met Father Amourous, the parish priest, and later, Father Duchassois. I became good friends with both of them during the time I spent in Rae Lakes. (As an aside, Father Duchassois once went to visit Vancouver, British Columbia. While there, he was approached by a woman after mass and asked if he had ever run into a man named Kieran Moore in the Northwest Territories. And of course he had. That woman was my sister, Deirdre.)



*Father Amourous and Father Duchassois*



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Father Amourous was a northerner at heart, though he had come here straight from France. I told him that he and the Ayatollah Khomeini were look-alikes, he being a more pleasing version. He didn't appreciate the comparison. But otherwise, he had a melodious laugh and was an uncanny linguist. He had learned Dogrib before he learned English. He also spoke French, Swiss German and Italian.

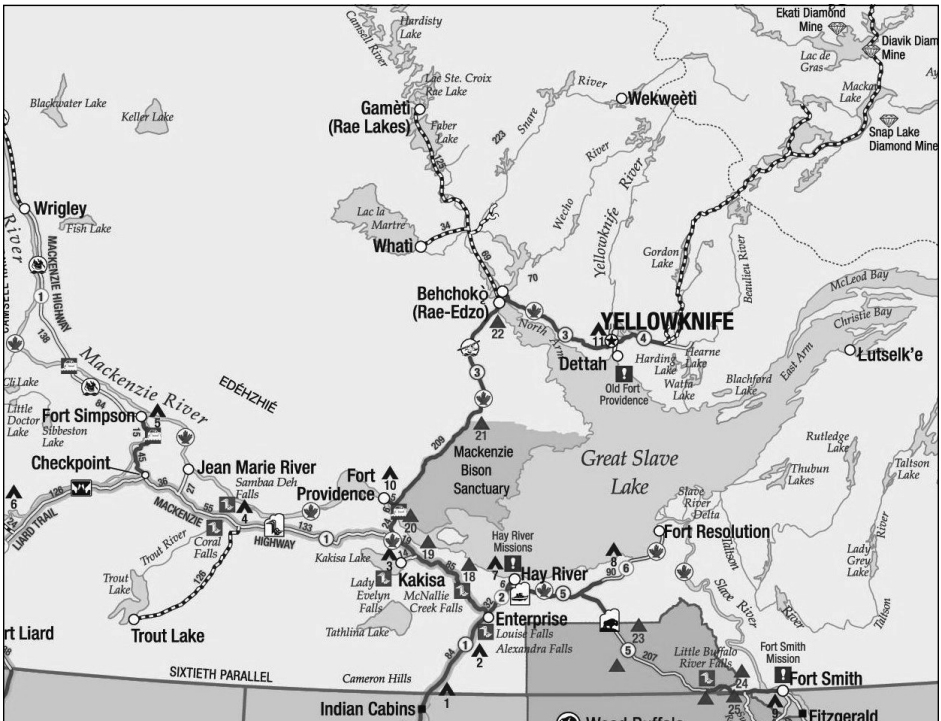
After loading the plane, a single-engine Turbo Beaver, we taxied across the rough surface of the ice, splashing up water from standing pools, and took off. As we flew, Father Amourous gave me a rundown on what to expect when we landed. He spoke of Dogrib customs, their way of life and why the community was located where it was, and painted a picture of their economic and social circumstances. What follows is a summary, in my words, of what he had to say.

Some of the Dene who settled in Fort Rae in the early 1960s had gravitated there from other communities such as Fort Franklin and Fort Simpson (Liidli Kue). They intermarried with the Dogrib in Fort Rae. They were unhappy with the overcrowding and with their treatment in Fort Rae, in particular the difficulty they had in getting housing assigned to them. Their distinctive culture was being threatened, their language taken away, their children forced into residential schools. Along with that, disease was running rampant in Fort Simpson, Fort Rae and Fort Franklin. They met to discuss their situation and consulted their elders and medicine men on the matter of moving out of these communities. Three groups were formed to search for appropriate locations.

One of these went north to the Barrenlands, another east, and the third went west. All returned at an appointed time, saying that they had not found a place that would provide them with the essentials to support their families year-round. Discouraged, they all headed south. A storm came up. After they established camp, one of the men noticed the firelight reflecting on something in the trunk of a tree. It turned out to be the shaft of an arrow.

They discussed this finding amongst themselves and then shared what they knew of the region in which they were. Fish, moose and ducks were plentiful, and they were in close proximity to the caribou migration routes. They concluded from this, and the sign of the arrow in the tree, that this was a place where their ancestors had hunted, and so decided that this was where they would settle.

They returned to Fort Rae, and one group moved their families by boat that summer to their new location. They called it Gamètì (Rae Lakes), a traditional Dene settlement halfway between Great Bear and Great Slave lakes. Rae Lakes was founded about ten years before my arrival in the community. The other two groups created the settlements of Snare Lake (Wekweètì) and Wha Ti.



Location of Rae Lakes, Wekweètì and Wha Ti

## MY FIRST DAYS IN RAE LAKES

---

**A**fter Father Amourous finished his detailed overview, I turned my attention to the landscape. The thousands of frozen lakes below had me wondering how it was possible to navigate and survive in such a sprawling wilderness. I was in disbelief at this stroke of good fortune that had me heading to work in a bush plane to do what I came north hoping to do, to give some concrete purpose to my life.

Whose God has a priest lose his fingers in answer to someone else's prayer? I wondered.

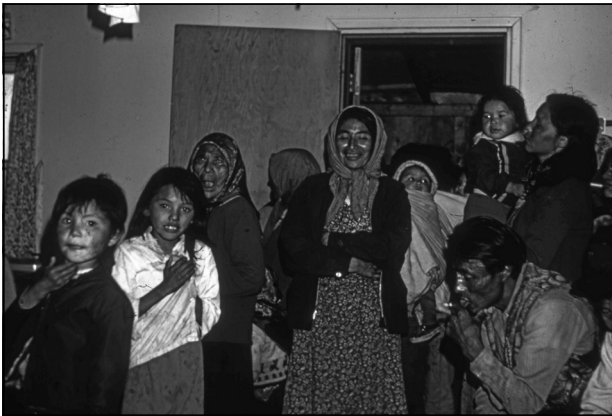
The plane circled the community, and down below I could see people coming out of their houses and heading for the dock. We landed on the ice and taxied up to the dock, exited the plane and started to unload right away. Over my shoulder, I saw a crowd, probably the entire population of the town, gathering on a hill by the shore. Father Amourous told me to stop what I was doing.

"Come; I'll introduce you to the community. They're expecting Father Duchassois and will be wondering who you are," he said.

*Community members  
visiting with us at the  
priest's house*



Approximately sixty people were gathered there, all dressed in bright colours. The women's scarves in red, blue and green presented a stark contrast to the background of ice and snow. The older women wore darker, full-length shawls and long dresses, and a number of the men wore blue or red kerchiefs like sweatbands around their foreheads. I stood out as pale as a sick ghost in the midst of people with such a dark and weathered complexion. Pride, self-confidence and unpretentiousness, masked by shyness, was a common characteristic of the men and women alike that I was to meet here.



*Another mix  
of greeters*

We climbed the embankment to join them. and Father Amourous proceeded to shake hands with every man, woman and child. He stopped and chatted, particularly

with the elders. Their exchange was in Dogrib and laced with laughter, particularly when he addressed the women. The men, almost without exception, puffed on pipes, and the aroma of tobacco hung in the air. The arrival of a plane was a rare event here. The warm reception and my being the centre of so much attention was overwhelming.

I had gone from feeling like a person of little consequence to being the focus of an entire community. The building of the church took on a whole new meaning for me. I could see that it was so much more than just a job; it was an important contribution, the building of a significant symbol of a settled community.

With every step Father Amourous took along the line of people, shaking their hands, a young boy of about nine, the first to greet Father Amourous, followed behind him. He was nicknamed Shadow. Our luggage was carried ahead to a cabin on the shoreline, where we were to stay. All of the family who normally lived there, with the exception of the wife, were away at a sanatorium for TB treatment.

*Typical log home at  
Rae Lakes*



As we arrived, we found an elderly woman, Bruno Apple's wife, busy splitting firewood. She greeted us and ushered us into her spotlessly clean, one-room house,

where we each had a two-by-four frame with planks to serve as a bed. In the centre of the house was a forty-five-gallon gas drum converted into a stove. Every home had a similar stove, except that in this case, the stove shone like stainless steel. The woman of the house scoured it daily with steel wool until it shone brilliantly.

We were invited to a feast, held that night in a cabin a little bigger than the one where we resided. Sheets of canvas were spread on the floor to form a large tablecloth. Piping hot pots, each filled with a selection of cooked caribou, moose meat or fish, steaming rice and raisins, were spread about on the canvas. Jars of jam, cubes of lard, heaps of bannock and bowls of boiled eggs were scattered amongst the pots, along with slabs of dry meat, pemmican and bone marrow. The house was lit by lanterns, and close to the ceiling was a grid of poles being used to dry meat.

Before going to the feast, I was told to bring a plate, a bowl, a cup, a knife and spoon wrapped in a tea towel—never a fork, which was regarded as the devil's tool by some. We sat on the floor, unwrapped the utensils and, once settled, someone walked down the middle of the tablecloth, serving tea. Others followed with rice and a soup of oatmeal and wild game. The men ate first, then the women, followed by the children. Any leftover food was shared out, to be taken home.



*Youthful mothers visiting with us in the priest's kitchen*

Once the house emptied out, it was cleaned and prepared for a drum dance. The drummers arrived and warmed the hand drums over the stove

to tighten the hide, so as to achieve a certain timbre. Then, when all were ready, the drumming began, resounding in the room and deep inside my chest cavity as it took on the double beat of the heart: ba-boom, ba-boom. It was a mesmerizing first-time experience with a culture so uniquely different from my own. I was deeply moved by the whole experience.

Dancers formed a circle, and the drummers faced east. The tempo built, and soon people began to step forward to dance. No order was evident; men, women and children, married or unmarried, everyone from every corner joined in the line. The house resounded with the rhythm of the drums and a haunting chant. Those standing around were encouraged to join in or sometimes pushed involuntarily into the circle, as happened to me. It was a remarkably spirited event, a powerful ritual so obviously steeped in tradition, that had everyone moving as one. It was an entry point into another way of life for me.

During my first month in Rae Lakes, as I worked on the church I saw men from the settlement applying themselves to a special communal task nearby. They had a collection of handsaws, axes and knives and were working on wooden staves around them.



*Preparing the gravesite fence*

They would squat randomly and sit cross-legged, smoking pipes or cigarettes and chatting as they whittled away on the small staves. I was curious as to what had drawn them together with such common purpose and was told that they were making a cross for a child's grave and a picket fence to surround it. I was surprised to find that this was only the second gravesite to be set up in the community, a fact indicative of just how new the settlement actually was. The first grave was also quite recent. It was that of an elderly woman, the wife of David Quitte, otherwise known as Eight and a Half Times Right David. More about him later.

This second grave was for a stillborn child. This child, who had not even drawn breath, received the same dedicated attention given to anyone else who died. Playing out before my eyes was a demonstration of the profound respect this community had for the individual and for life itself, all expressed in this simple act of preparing a gravesite. There were no signs of outward mourning; they just worked away with an unspoken regard for a life lost.

Once finished, they formed a procession and walked single file toward the plot of land set aside as the graveyard, each carrying staves. The one leading the group carried the cross. Once at the gravesite, the cross was planted and the fence staked in place.

To me, this seemed fitting—that the first grave dug here was for an elder who had lived a long, productive life, and located beside her gravesite was the resting place of a stillborn child, prepared with equal respect. Someone said it was a way of giving a child to the old woman, so she would not be lonely in the spirit world.

This small experience prompted me to look at life from a different perspective. I'm not stretching it to say that it left me feeling attuned to the heartbeat of the planet. I had come north to give meaning to my life, and I believe it began to happen right here.



*Log home, tipi smoke tent and my prospector's tent*



*John Bekali's brother (Michael) with staked-out dog team*