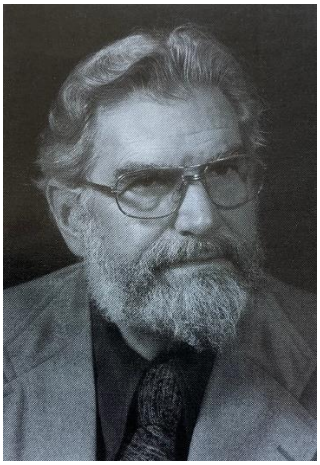
Norman William (Bill) Radforth (1912-1999)

By Anna Burwash (adapted from *Geotechnical News*, Sept. 1999)



Bill Radforth's name was synonymous with muskeg and peat in universities, government, consulting engineering, military organizations and resource industries. He extensively studied the fossil plant material that composed peat and its live vegetation cover.

Bill was best known in the geotechnical community for his vegetation cover classification systems that assists engineers and designers in choosing routes for highways, railways and pipelines across frozen, thawing and unfrozen terrain, and for his 17-category classification system of peat for engineering purposes.

He chaired the Muskeg Subcommittee of the Associate Committee on Geotechnical Research, National Research Council of Canada, from 1948 to 1975. Bill became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1959. Bill wrote several chapters in the *Muskeg Engineering Handbook*, published in 1969, and co-edited *Muskeg and the Northern Environment in Canada* with C.O. Brawner, published in 1977.

Bill received a BA and MA degrees from the University of Toronto in 1936 and 1937, respectively. He received a PhD from Glasgow University in 1939. In 1946, he joined the faculty of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, as Head of Botany and Founding Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens. He was Chair of McMaster's Department of Biology from 1960 until 1966 and Chair of its Organic and Associated Terrain Research Unit from 1963 to 1968.

In 1968, Bill accepted an offer from the University of New Brunswick to become Director of the Muskeg Research Institute and Head of the Biology Department. He remained at UNB until his retirement in 1977. At UNB, Bill actively supported and encouraged the work initiated by Arvid Landva on the development of sampling equipment and testing procedures for peat. Several years before retirement, he donated his extensive collection of scientific papers on peat and related topics to the UNB library.

Throughout his career, Bill's interest in peat led him in many directions beyond traditional biological research. He was involved in trafficability testing for military purposes. In later

years, he collaborated with is son, John, on off-road vehicle testing to advise governments, and vehicle manufacturers and resource companies.

Bill sampled and documented peat deposits around the world. He consulted broadly on potential uses for peat as fuel, for horticulture, recreation, beverage enhancement and therapeutic applications, and designations of specific peatlands for preservation. He continued to discuss and develop plans for interesting projects until shortly before his death on April 11, 1999, in Perry Sound, Ontario.