

WHO WAS BJÖRN KURTÉN ?

by Mikael Fortelius



Björn Kurtén (1924-1988) was Finnish citizen, renowned at home and abroad from his novels and his palaeontological work. He was award-winning both as a writer and as a scientist, and held a personal professorship in palaeontology at the University of Helsinki from 1972 until 1988.

He became internationally known in the 1950's by applying the new quantitative methods to fossil material. These methods were based on population ecology of "Modern Synthesis" in biology. A good example of his novel approach to fossil material is the title his PhD thesis: "On the variation and population dynamics of fossil and recent mammal populations" (*Acta Zoologica Fennica* 76). Kurtén's own research focused mainly on carnivorous mammals, especially on bears, and later also on hyenas.

Kurtén was also, and perhaps foremost, a writer; he wrote his first novel in his late teens, and during his life produced vast amount of scientific publications and literature. He wrote both in English and in Swedish, and his writings have been translated at least to fifteen different languages. His most well-known works are *Pleistocene Mammals of Europe*, *The Age of Mammals*, *The Ice Age*, *The Cave Bear Story* and *Pleistocene Mammals of North America* (monographs), *Not from the Apes*, *How to Deep-Freeze a Mammoth* and *Innocent Killers* (collected essays), and novels *Dance of the Tiger* and *Singletusk*.

Kurtén said that he chose palaeontology after the second World War because he did not want to do anything "useful", and later he referred to the beauty of fossils as an inspiration to work. About working in a country almost devoid of fossils he commented that only those who must travel to see fossils will understand the whole picture.

The Björn Kurtén-Club bears his name as a reminder that it is possible to practice world-class palaeontology even in Finland.