

Appendix 1

Obituary of John Scott Lennox Gilmour*

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JOHN SCOTT LENNOX GILMOUR, who died in Cambridge on the 3rd June 1986 aged 79, was Director of the University Botanic Garden from 1951 to 1973, and Fellow of Clare College from 1951. Born in London on 28th September 1906, he was educated at Uppingham, and proceeded to Clare College in 1925, already an enthusiastic field botanist. JOHN himself describes his "conversion" to the pleasures of botanizing with characteristic style in the book written jointly with myself for the New Naturalist Series entitled "Wild Flowers" (1954): "When I went to a preparatory school I knew and cared nothing about wild plants. At the end of the summer term each boy had to produce fifty named species. On the last day but one I had not collected a single plant. Desperation drove me to a high-speed tour of the lanes near the school, guided by a friend who had already made his collection, and on the following day I duly presented my fifty plants. This discreditable incident implanted in me, against every modern principle of education, a passion for the British flora which has never been extinguished."

After reading Part II Botany, JOHN was appointed Curator of the University Herbarium and Botanical Museum in Cambridge, and a firm botanical alliance came into being which has been of enormous influence on botanical science in this country ever since. This was the friendship between GILMOUR, STEARN and TUTIN, three names of great significance for British botany in the last half-century. The early fruits of their collaboration can be seen in what was JOHN's second published paper which he wrote with WILLIAM STEARN in 1932. Entitled "Notes from the University Herbarium, Cambridge", it consists mainly of the two series of Exsiccatae labels sent out from the Herbarium, and represents the re-birth of interest in botanical taxonomy after a period of relative stagnation and neglect. From such friendly, enthusiastic collaboration presided over by that remarkable man HUMPHREY GILBERT-CARTER in the crucial inter-war period springs so much that my generation now takes for granted, not least the renamed and rejuvenated Botanical Society of the British Isles (1947) and CLAPHAM, TUTIN and WARBURG's Flora (1952). In this revival, JOHN GILMOUR played a very important part.

It is not, however, as a keen field botanist and student of the British flora that GILMOUR will be mainly remembered, though his support for the Botanical Society

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of the British Isles (BSBI) and, later, the voluntary nature conservation bodies was always generous and helpful. (For the record, he served as the first President of the re-born and re-named B.S.B.I. from 1948 to 1951, and as President of the Cambridgeshire and Isel of Ely Naturalists' Trust, CAMBIENT, from 1958 to 1974.) His permanent botanical reputation was made in two other directions, namely in scientific horticulture on the one hand, and in the theory and philosophy of biological classification on the other. Of course these two areas of interest were linked, and both developed naturally from his unexpectedly rapid career promotion to become, in 1931, at the age of 25, Assistant Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew under Sir ARTHUR HILL. Since, however, the two areas brought GILMOUR into active involvement—and often leadership—of two very different groups of people, it is best to deal with them separately.

The horticultural contribution was, of course, made against a background of a distinguished career in Botanic Gardens which took him from Kew to the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley (1946–1951), and from there back to the University Botanic Garden in Cambridge from which he retired in 1973. His appointment to succeed his former teacher and friend HUMPHREY GILBERT-CARTER gave him a unique opportunity to plan and preside over the doubling in size of the Cambridge Garden, a development made possible by the generous bequest to the University in REGINALD CORY's will. During the 1950's and early 1960's this rapid expansion, involving many new features, was accompanied by an esprit de corps amongst the generations of student gardeners which owed much to the Director's energy, ability, enthusiasm and charm. Such "golden ages" produce a persistent harvest, not least of talented young people who are now amongst the leading horticulturists and "plantsmen" in Britain: this network of former Botanic Garden students testifies to JOHN's great talent as a sympathetic, humane administrator in that key period of post-war development. It is not surprising that he found himself increasingly called upon to use his talents and unfailing good manners in the complex and often frustrating field of committees, national and international, which deal with the nomenclature of both wild and cultivated plants. He was in fact Chairman of the International Commission on Horticultural Nomenclature from 1952 to 1966, and Secretary ("rapporteur") and later Chairman of the International Commission on the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants from 1956 to 1965. More than any other person in his generation, JOHN was able to be persona grata to a very wide spectrum of colleagues ranging from the professional taxonomist to the amateur gardener, and his invariably tolerant and patient interpretation of the feelings and concerns of such disparate groups who used plant names is still bearing important fruit to the present day in the circles of the Royal Horticultural Society and beyond. Indeed, the R.H.S. recognized as early as 1957 the signal distinction of GILMOUR's contribution by awarding him the Victoria Medal of Honour, and on his retirement in 1973 JOHN was delighted to receive the well-earned tribute of a volume of the prestigious Curtis's Botanical Magazine dedicated to him.

GILMOUR's other contribution to botanical science is in a more controversial area where relatively few botanists (or horticulturists) operate. Ideas on the philosophy of classification which, at least in botanical circles, are increasingly called "Gilmourian" were set out in papers some 50 years ago, when he was in his late twenties. They are characterized by a severely pragmatic attitude to all human

classificatory activities, and are presented against a philosophical background which is that of “logical positivism” Earnest, and indeed often polemical, discussion about the relationship between evolution and classification which still goes on in the scientific literature shows that the root problems identified by GILMOUR in the 1930’s remain unsolved – at least in the sense that there is no agreed consensus amongst biologists. It is perhaps not generally recognized how important GILMOUR’s contribution was in this difficult field. “The New Systematics” (the title of the book edited by JULIAN HUXLEY in 1940 in which GILMOUR first reached a wide audience of biologists with his ideas), from which both experimental taxonomy (biosystematics) and numerical taxonomy developed in this country, was a product of the Systematics Association, in the formation of which in 1935 GILMOUR played a key role. Others, notably TURRILL and HUXLEY, played an important part, of course, but there is little doubt that GILMOUR’s ability to bring disparate groups of colleagues together for effective discussion was being exercised to remarkable effect on botanists and zoologists in these early days. Incidentally, the pioneering role of the new Systematics Association, which came to the fore in the immediate post-war period, meant that GILMOUR’s energy went into this rather than into the more prestigious but staid Linnean Society – though he served twice on the Council of that Society, first in war-time (1940 – 42) and secondly from 1953 – 1957.

No account of JOHN GILMOUR’s life would be complete without reference to his wider social and humanitarian concerns which reflected his rationalist philosophy. In post-war Cambridge much of this “extra-mural” effort went into the activities of the Cambridge Humanists, of which he became President in 1975. Believing strongly and sincerely that all “absolutes” are inimical to the proper development of human civilization and culture, he felt it a moral imperative to “preach” his beliefs, but in the process he remained unfailingly courteous and sensitive to all, not least to the professionals of religions whose views he strongly rejected for himself.

The last years of JOHN’s life were increasingly restricted and troubled by infirmity and illness, which meant that many of his exceptionally wide circle of friends and colleagues were no longer able to benefit from his sympathetic and lively mind, though to the few who were near him he remained faithful and accessible. In particular he was blessed by a devoted wife and happy family circle, whose support was undeviating; his pleasure at the growing clan of grandchildren lightened the end.