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# Obituary: Walter John Le Quesne (17.5.1922 – 25.5.2006)

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Walter Le Quesne, who died in Chesham, Buckinghamshire, on 25th May, 2006, was a man of many achievements across a wide range of subjects resting on the broad base of his formidable intellect. His work, as a professional chemist, and his entomological studies were scientific, but his ever-enquiring mind ranged over languages, literature, genealogy and other non-scientific fields, which revealed an astonishing variety and breadth of interest. For such an active person the last few years of his life were most poignant, with failing sight, leading to almost complete blindness, and only his astonishing memory to maintain his phenomenal mental ability.

Walter was born into an artisan's family in St Helier, Jersey, on 17th May 1922. He attended the local Junior school from which in 1932 he won a States of Jersey scholarship to Victoria College, the Jersey public school. His academic abilities were presaged, perhaps, by his teaching himself for pleasure the dates of birth, ascension to the throne and death of all the monarchs of England, before he went to school at the age of six. At Victoria his academic successes included The King's Gold Medal for Mathematics in 1939, his final year, and the King Charles I Scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford, for which he took a belated one-term course of university-entrance Latin. His tutor urged him to learn some German during the long vacation in 1940, which unavoidably became the five years of the German Occupation of the Channel Islands, when he grudgingly acquired the occupiers' language.

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After the war, with his degree completed, he took his PhD in organic chemistry and joined the Radiochemical Centre at Amersham, then a branch of the UK Atomic Energy Authority. His work there extended into computing, then in its very early stages, for which he began writing programs in very basic systems using 'machine language' or 'C', well before the advent of off-the-shelf programs, and with which he continued throughout his life.

Walter was a senior researcher, later appointed an Assistant Manager of the Centre with responsibility *inter alia* for the synthesising and radioactive-labelling of biologically important compounds. He remained in that post with gradually increasing responsibilities as, although his intellectual interests and abilities far exceeded those of most of his colleagues in this large organisation, job satisfaction was what mattered for Walter; competing for personal advancement he left to others.

Former colleagues tell of a temperamental volatility when Walter was exasperated by some object or process – never a person – that had aroused his ire, and of hearing profuse invective in words incomprehensible to them, his native Jersey-French. They also tell of a kind, gentlemanly person who never condescended to those less gifted and who always made them feel they were making discoveries with an equal partner.

His busy, challenging, professional life was lived in parallel with another, even more distinguished, in entomology. The exigencies of wartime and enemy occupation had led Roderick Dobson, a first-class amateur naturalist, to form a junior section of the Société Jersiaise which Walter joined and, in close collaboration with Dobson, embarked on investigating the entirety of Jersey's insect fauna. Being unable to return to Oxford, Walter found valuable wartime employment in Jersey's hospital's pathology laboratory throughout the Occupation, which gave him access to microscopes. The result was a series of papers in the Société's Annual Bulletins, mainly Walter's work, on moths and butterflies, dragonflies, caddis flies, lace-wings, mayflies and allied orders, and Heteroptera.

In 1959 Walter married Margaret Hinton, who was also employed at the Research Centre, and they settled in Chesham, near his work, where they brought up their two children, David and Helen. About this time Walter extended his interest, initially focussed on Heteroptera, to other groups of the Hemiptera, particularly the Auchenorrhyncha, in which he acquired a formidable expertise and an international reputation for taxonomic studies. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society, served on its council for some years and was a Vice-President from 1983 to 1985. His most important work for the Society was the publication of his four parts on Hemiptera: Auchenorrhyncha, in the important series of Handbooks for the Identification of British Insects. His set of these books, with modern keys, provided valuable new encouragement to entomologists to study this group. In 1984 he received the Stamford Raffles Award from the Zoological Society of London for distinguished contributions to the taxonomy and biology of Hemiptera. This was followed in 1986 with the award by the Linnean Society, the most prestigious of all natural history societies, of the H. H. Bloomer Award for outstanding work by an amateur biologist.

In addition to his published contributions to practical insect taxonomy, and brilliant fieldwork Walter produced major studies in numerical taxonomy. His concept of the 'uniquely evolved character', developed in a series of papers, mainly in Systematic Zoology between 1969 and '79, has been widely cited and used by taxonomists in many fields of biology.

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Walter's studies of varied groups within the Hemiptera took him to a number of countries in Europe for fieldwork, to meet other experts, usually professional biologists, and to attend conferences. He made collections which are a testimony to consummate skill in dissecting delicate insects, few of any size and mostly very small, and displaying their internal features on accompanying tiny pieces of card. His general collections he gave to Liverpool World Museum at the University, and he deposited with the Société Jersiaise a virtually complete collection of Jersey's Hemiptera along with other insects as soon as he assembled them. Membre d'Honneur de la Société Jersiaise is a sparingly-awarded honour, and in recognition of Walter's outstanding contributions to the work and objectives of the Société he was nominated a Membre d'Honneur in 1994.

Walter had a keen interest in languages – and, incidentally, in alphabets – and taught himself Serbo-Croat in three months prior to a field trip to Jugoslavia, to add to his fluent German, both languages being helpful in working with entomologists in his field.

His intellectual energies found further outlets in several directions. The house magazine of Amersham plc – one of the atomic energy research establishment's successive names – published regular mathematical puzzles, of his devising, which were popular and challenging even for his scientifically high-powered colleagues. This periodical also printed some of his poems with which, with some justification, he was, in his words, reasonably pleased. Making literary judgement poses a risk that one is likely to come to grief; my assessment is based on comments of a former colleague at Amersham, and some pieces Walter gave me 'to look after' late in his life when his sight was failing. They appear perceptive, original and characteristically witty.

His final field of research was genealogy, a subject admirably suited to a relatively self-contained island population such as Jersey's, with reliable records of many family surnames going back for centuries, of which Le Quesne and de Gruchy are typical examples. Research into his own family's origins produced much information on the prolific de Gruchys – his paternal grandmother's family – and resulted in his book, with G. M. Dixon, *The de Gruchys of Jersey* was followed shortly by a similarly comprehensive and thoroughly researched study, *The Le Quesnes of Jersey*, both published by the Channel Islands Family History Society.

By this time Walter was suffering from inexorable deterioration of vision. His great intellect was totally unaffected by the causative condition, and increasing blindness was the cruellest of handicaps for one whose chief lifelong recreation had been conducted virtually through the eyepiece of a microscope. Historical documents, not easy to read at the best of times, became ever more difficult for him, and with remarkable pragmatism he reconciled himself to disposing of his collections, his microscopes and his books. He kept his computer, and his programming skill enabled him to enlarge the characters on its screen to an inch high, at about twenty per line, which his eyes almost touching the screen viewed in a raster-like motion, while writing programs for pictorial puzzles and geometric games, mainly for my benefit. Rectifying the errors I was able to point out each week became almost his sole intellectual challenge for the next seven days. His computer characters grew until there were only a dozen or so on each of five lines out of the two or three hundred lines of program for his puzzles and patterns, all of which he had to carry in his own astonishing memory, as they could not be written down. Further attempts to see them soon became futile. His frustration when things were not discernible would have tried a saint, but all he would allow himself by way of complaint was that '… it is rather irritating'.

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It was immensely saddening on my weekly meetings with Walter to see such a powerful, still enquiring mind unable to do little more than converse with my modest entomological and mathematical abilities. Yet, in circumstances which could have allowed well-justified depression, he evinced not the least self-pity and displayed a stoicism and fortitude, which most people would have found very difficult to adopt.

An annual visit by Walter and Margaret to their daughter in Chesham at Christmas 2005 lengthened to residence in sheltered accommodation nearby in the new year, and he died after a short illness four months later.

I am grateful for assistance with this account to David Le Quesne and John Badmin, and to a published appreciation by Russell Bayly. Many others have spoken of their admiration for Walter, his friendship, and the academic brilliance of an exceptional person.

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