

MARY J. P. (MAURA) SCANNELL (1924 – 2011)

Always immaculately turned out, a fount of knowledge and a remarkable conversationalist, Maura Scannell has been a central figure in Ireland's botanical world for over 60 years. A skilled horsewoman in her youth, Maura graduated from University College Cork and became Assistant Keeper of the Natural History Division of the National Museum in 1949. It was there that she developed her deep and thorough understanding of the cultural importance of plants in Irish culture and history.

Maura took a special interest in the botanical details of our past, identifying the various woods of all the Irish harps in the National Museum as well as numerous artefacts from Wood Quay, as just two small examples. Her knowledge of charcoal, seeds, fibres and dye plants, as well as microscopic algae and fungi, and such esoteric subjects as 'algal paper', made her an inspiration to generations of botanists. To both young and old, Maura was supremely generous with her time and energy, and a tireless correspondent. She was never too busy to be diverted by an interested schoolboy or schoolgirl visiting the museum, and had a long association, as a respected judge since the 1960s, of the annual Irish Young Scientists Exhibition.

Many of today's leading Irish botanists owe their love of botany to the remarkable adult who took the time to impart her enthusiasm for the plant world. Her fostering of scientists was shared with all, and she assisted Evelyn Booth, then at the age of 82, to collate hundreds of records and to publish the *Flora of County Carlow* in 1979.

In 1970 she oversaw the transfer of the National Herbarium from the National Museum to the National Botanic Gardens, beginning a 20 year re-establishment of science at the Gardens. Last minute arrangements nearly resulted in major collections being disbursed, until Maura ensured they were moved in their entirety to

the National Botanic Gardens. The nursery staff at Glasnevin were well used to her returning on a Monday morning with living plants to be grown on. Through careful studies of living plants she was able to make full use of the gardens as a centre for taxonomic understanding. A singular example was her dogged determination to resolve the identity of the 'Renvyle *Hydrilla*'. Leading taxonomists in Britain had identified this plant as an *Elodea*, but when Maura finally flowered the plant in the Garden greenhouses she was able to prove that the plant was, as she had always suspected, *Hydrilla verticillata*. Her great interest in history and books gave her the foresight to enable the Herbarium to acquire one of its more remarkable treasures – a bound collection of specimens dating from the 1690s and once owned by Thomas Molyneux, a founder of the Dublin Society. This was bought from the library at Moore Abbey in Monasterevin. Her other hunch, to purchase the only known portrait of one of the Garden's founders, Walter Wade, was sadly ignored by the authorities at the time.

On her retirement in 1989 as Head of the National Herbarium, Maura Scannell had already established a remarkable body of work. Her collections in the Herbarium are among the largest by any single botanist; all the more remarkable when one considers that most were obtained during her own leisure time. Since retiring she remained an active visitor to the Herbarium, a field botanist and author, contributing specimens, answering queries and publishing papers.

The sum of her many specimens, publications and manuscripts represent a vast repository of knowledge about the plants that fill our landscape. Her dedication and assistance meant that she contributed more to the published work of others than to her own, through her thorough attention to correspondence, identification of samples and her intimate and eclectic knowledge of

Irish history, geography, ethnography, zoology, geology and botany. From 1963 to 1994 she had remained a constant and active member of the Irish regional committee of the Botanical Society of the British Isles, and in 1995 she was made an Honorary Member of the society.

Maura was presented with the National Botanic Gardens Medal in May 2008, in acknowledgment of her truly remarkable contributions to Irish botany. At the presentation she gave a spirited talk about her delight in the scale of botany, from the microscopic fungi she had discovered, new to science, in the grounds of the Botanic Gardens (*Dothiorella davidiae* on the fruits of *Davidia involucrata* in 1976), to exploring for plants in the west of Ireland. She described how it is the little things that are sometimes important, and botanists should record all that they see in a scientific manner, and that no information should ever be overlooked.

Maura produced over 200 scientific publications, as well as several important floras and catalogues. Besides her thousands of specimens and tens of thousands of field observations, she has left a thorough record of her correspondence in the National Herbarium. In the last year Maura has meticulously sorted her files and deposited a vast archive of her work at the Gardens – a remarkable assemblage of books, specimens, museum items and other ephemera associated with the Irish flora. She remained intellectually agile and fascinated by all around her to her dying day. She will be greatly missed by her colleagues, the staff at the gardens and botanists both at home and abroad.

MATTHEW JEBB

(Obituary published by the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin, reprinted with permission)

Maura Scannell

Reminiscences as printed in Irish Botanical News March 2012.

My first ever BSBI field meeting was in West Cork (H03), in the summer of 1997, led by Maura Scannell. On arrival in Bandon, a little unsure, I looked around for the leader. Wearing a stylish hat and holding Webb's *Flora* in her hand, she immediately stood out from the crowd. Maura took me under her wing that day and generously dispensed tips on plant identification. The following day she showed this novice not only the beautiful *Carex limosa*, (Bog-sedge), but also how to avoid sinking through the floating mat of vegetation where it grows. She will be sadly missed.

FIONA DEVERY

Glaring at armed soldiers at Six Counties border posts, not wanting to stop for an imperial occupation power which she refused to recognise; splashing along the shores of Lough Derg, leading us straight to the right stand of willows hiding *Inula salicina*; holding court among a crowd of BSBI members, picnicking beside the bridge at Inistioge, managing to look queenly in a pink knitted hat; wearing a magical multi-coloured shawl at a conference dinner, answering a cheeky (well flown) questioner about why she never married, saying that plants took her time, and anyway 'the humour has left me now'. No botanist ever had greater dignity in all circumstances!

RO FITZGERALD

I met Maura just the once. We had a brief chat about *Minuartia recurva* (Recurved Sandwort) in Ireland for several minutes at the National Botanic Gardens. It is Maura's kindness that I will always remember. Once she knew I was interested in the flora of Co. Waterford, I was sent many botanical articles and papers relating to the county. Some of these were original printings from over a hundred years ago. Maura also sent me various county floras from around Ireland. Each parcel always had a note to

say 'no need to acknowledge'. I will always be very grateful for her kindness and generosity.

PAUL R. GREEN

One of the first times that I was on a field trip with Maura was in 1986, when I led a BSBI trip to the Alt Mountain near Ardara on the 100th anniversary of Hart's visit there in 1886, when he found *Saxifraga aizoides*. Hannah and I had our four children with us, all under nine years. Half way up the mountain Maura stopped, sat down with them, and proceeded to show them how to make corn dollies and St. Bridget's crosses. They thought that she was wonderful and have not forgotten her!

ROBERT NORTHRIDGE

I am a botanist because of Maura Scannell. She was friendly with my aunt Elinor Wiltshire in Dublin in the early 1960s, and my aunt must have told her that she had a niece doing science. Maura must then have told her about this new society in Ireland, the Botanical Society of the British Isles. The summer of 1964 was approaching and I had just finished my first year at Trinity, unsure of which subjects I wanted to pursue. My aunt said that she would pay for me to go on a junior BSBI residential meeting at Roundstone. I went and had a wonderful time! Apart from the young people, including schoolboy Daniel Kelly, there was the leader Peter Hunt from Kew, also Father Moore from UCD and David Webb. I loved being out in the field in Connemara and identifying plants, and at the end of two weeks I had no doubt about what I wanted to be – a botanist!

It was also Maura who first suggested that I write a flora of Co. Limerick. With small children in the late 1970s, that seemed impossible. However, more than 30 years later and now a grandmother, I am trying to finish that flora! Maura's correspondence, particularly her typed notes, was always fun to unravel. It was she who drew my attention to the first published Limerick record, *Geranium lucidum* on walls in Limerick,

spotted by a trooper in King William's army in 1703. Maura's continuing interest in my work and her friendship have been important to me over the years, and her influence will live on.

SYLVIA REYNOLDS

I wish I could remember when I first met Maura Scannell. It was probably in the late 1970s, in either Belfast or Dublin. Whilst I can't now remember where or when it was, I do remember the impression she left on me. In common parlance, I thought she was 'one smart cookie'! Over the years, I think a sort of 'mutual admiration society' emerged. I admired her professional approach to field botany whilst she admired my editing skills. As time went on, we exchanged numerous letters ... or, more accurately, notes ... on all manner of things, largely, but not exclusively botany. I'm not sure she established the same letter-exchange with others, but, if she did, then her output must have been monumental.

I always found Maura a very generous woman and perhaps two examples of this, that spring to mind, will help readers develop their own picture of her.

I had a committee meeting in Dublin at the Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin. It was a few days before Christmas. At the appointed hour, the meeting started and, uncharacteristically, Maura was missing. Fifteen minutes in, and Maura appeared, slightly out of breath and flustered. She apologised profusely for her lateness; the reason was she had been shopping for Christmas presents and proceeded to delve into her capacious bag and give each member of the committee a small pack of coffee beans as a present. A lovely gesture and much appreciated.

That was planned, but, on another occasion, the generosity was spontaneous. Again I had a meeting in Dublin on a Saturday afternoon and had taken my wife and young son Ian (he was about five at the time) down as well so that we could do some shopping beforehand. We were walking down O'Connell Street and 'bumped' into

Maura who was also going to the meeting. I introduced my wife and son. Maura again delved into a very large shopping bag and pulled out a colouring-in book and set of crayons and gave them to Ian. He was overjoyed and spent many hours with them over the ensuing months. At the time, she explained that she had bought them for relatives but had a 'few over'! Totally un-expected and very thoughtful. Ian never forgot the rather stern-looking woman with the funny hat who had given him a present!

I mentioned correspondence before. This covered every conceivable aspect of botany. Often the notes were related to field observations that she thought should be followed up. Many were odd snippets of information that she'd found in her wide-reading ... and a few of these made their way, eventually, into *Irish Botanical News*. One of her very last notes to me was about stamps! She had seen the 20 cent stamp in the fifth phase of

stamps from the sixth definitive series, entitled 'Wild Flowers of Ireland', issued originally on 3rd March 2008. This particular series was designed to show species typically found in coastal areas and included Thrift (20 cents), Biting Stonecrop (50 cents) and Sea Aster (82 cents), illustrated by Susan Sex. Maura was very unhappy about the depiction of Thrift ... she wrote that the inflorescence was, in her opinion, a globular mop-head, not the loose association of flowers depicted. I wasn't sure what I was expected to do (if anything)! But it was written in her inimitable, somewhat terse style – with an ageing type-writer on recycled paper. In many ways, I'm rather grateful she never became computer-literate (as far as I'm aware) ... she would have been a prodigious e-mailer!

I miss her; she was a 'one-off'.

BRIAN S. RUSHTON



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