

# OBITUARIES

## MARJORIE NETTA BLAMEY MBE (1918–2019)

Marjorie Blamey's watercolour illustrations are so well known in best-selling plant guides that it is a surprise to learn that it was not until she was in her late 40s that she began to paint seriously, and that only after a local Cornish gardener and author had seen her paintings at the county flower show in 1966. She opened a little gallery in Looe, and the story goes that the redoubtable Billy Collins, chairman of the eponymous publishers, saw her wildlife paintings in the window, and came in and asked if she did watercolours of plants. Marjorie said not really, but he suggested that she did some and then send them to him for approval. She did a few, and approval was obviously forthcoming, for this led to a long period of involvement with Collins (her first work for them was *Cottage Gardens*, by Roy Genders, 1969) including a commission to assist Richard and

Alastair Fitter in producing a new wildflower guide, a successor to the much-loved McClintock & Fitter, first produced in 1956, but covering NW Europe as well. This, *Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe*, appeared in 1974. In full colour, dealing with 1200 species, with text opposite the illustrations, this new guide was an instant success. In its various editions, it apparently sold a million copies, and ushered in a period of intense activity for Marjorie that spanned the next 30 years. Plants were sent from all over northern Europe, often in flat aluminium boxes. One of her remarkable skills was taking a wilted specimen and making it look as though it was actually growing. Alastair Fitter comments that sometimes she would point out that there was too much or too little on a plate, especially when the plants were large, but generally she found a way to



Marjorie and Philip Blamey at Michael Walter's house in Provence, 1977, with Marjorie painting for *Alpine Flowers* and Philip bathing a tired foot. *Chris Grey-Wilson*

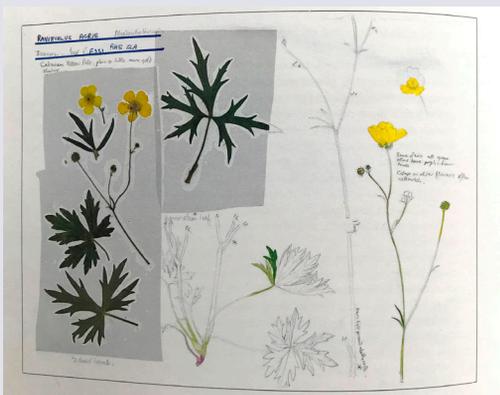
either shoe-horn them in, or to use the extra space effectively, which was immensely helpful because it meant that the necessary comparators were usually all on one plate. An expanded version of this guide, in larger format, was issued in 1997, though neither covered ferns, grasses, sedges and rushes. Alastair notes that due to the high cost of colour printing it was necessary to cover a wider area than Britain so that costs could be recouped by producing editions in many languages.

Marjorie Netta Day was born on 13 March 1918 in Talawakelle, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where her father, Arthur, worked as a doctor. The family returned to Britain in 1921 to live at Sandown, Isle of Wight, and then Epsom, Surrey. Marjorie painted as a girl, and with her brother she enjoyed collecting hawk-moth caterpillars and rearing them on their appropriate food plants. By World War II she had shown promise as a young artist, as a photographer (with her own Leica) and as an actress, training at RADA and crossing paths with Ivor Novello and Laurence Olivier. In the war she volunteered as a nurse, drove ambulances and met her future husband, Philip, with whom she farmed in Cornwall from after the war until painting took first place.

As soon as her botanical work took off, Marjorie and her husband Philip worked very much as a team. Philip was her constant support throughout her painting career, and, indeed in a marriage that

lasted over 70 years. In the early 1970s they made frequent trips to Kew, to paint plants for their work, and they met Chris Grey-Wilson, then a scientific officer there. This led to their first collaboration with him, *Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe* (1979), which involved trips to the Alps and Pyrenees, where Marjorie's astonishing facility for quickly capturing the form of a plant was displayed for the first time. Chris tells the story that one day in Andorra he and Philip collected 21 new plants, gave them to Marjorie that evening, and she had painted them by the next day! She and Philip bought a series of camper vans that were ideal for collecting and painting plants as they travelled around. Each plant was drawn, pressed and then mounted on a card giving all the salient details, shades of colour, etc. Although both artist and author were intensely disappointed with the colour reproduction of this book, nothing remotely comparable had been available for the British market. Both this and her 1993 work *Mediterranean Wild Flowers*, also with Chris Grey-Wilson, where for the first time her name preceded his, became constant and indispensable companions on all trips to Europe. *Mediterranean Wild Flowers* in particular broke new ground in coverage and complements the enduring guides by Oleg Polunin. This was when one of us (DP) first met author and artist, and Philip, and saw her techniques for preserving the plants overnight – in Tupperware-style containers lined with absorbent paper. Philip set these up ready for Marjorie, who would be up at 4.00 am the next day, painting these before breakfast and the next day's collections. The painted plant would then be pressed, and mounted, covered with a sort of adhesive acetate, on a card together with the sketch and notes including shades to be used.

Right from the start her editor at Collins was Michael Walter, who guided her and Philip throughout her career, both when he worked for Collins and later as a freelance, and it was doubtless him who opened the door for other collaborations in the Collins stable. For throughout this period there was a stream of other publications, with books on watercolour techniques, on *Bulbs of Europe* (with Chris Grey-Wilson and Brian Mathew), *Food for Free*



Marjorie Blamey's specimen and sketches of *Ranunculus acris*, now on long-term loan to the University of Plymouth.

(for Richard Mabey), *Scented Plants* (for Roy Genders) and even the cover of John Raven's *A Botanist's Garden* (1971) and a little work on herbs and spices. She occasionally used her existing illustrations, but usually supplied new paintings, and some think that her little vignettes of flowers, such as those in *Fruits, Nuts & Berries* (1984), are amongst her most satisfying images. She certainly knew how to compose a scene. These paintings, with their accompanying notes and pressed plants, eventually totalled over 10,000, and are now on permanent loan to the University of Plymouth. The most important and perhaps the most pleasing publication of this period was *The Illustrated Flora of Britain and Northern Europe* (1989), also with Chris Grey-Wilson, in a larger and very pleasing format, with thumbnail sketches of key features down the margins of each plate, making a useful and visually attractive whole. Paintings for this might well have led to a curious tale of discovery in Cornwall a few years ago. DP with Anita, his wife, and Ian Bennallick, were recording on the West Looe River, south of Liskeard in Cornwall, and found, to their surprise, a large colony of Purple Toothwort (*Lathraea clandestina*). We followed the patches for several miles upstream, then up a side valley and the trail ended at the gate of an isolated house. We knocked on the door, asked for permission to come in, and the owner casually told us that the house used to belong to the Blameys! The plant was obviously a relic of her painting, escaped from the garden and washed downstream.

Her family say that her favourite book was *Marjorie Blamey's Flowers of the Countryside* (1980), written with her husband, Philip – a delightful assembly of text on plants of various habitats, painting techniques, folk-lore and much else; again with lots of vignettes.

There was no let-up in her work. Once when her family hadn't heard from her for some weeks – she was in Bhutan – and they were worried, they asked why she couldn't instead go on a nice Saga holiday? Her final works included *Marjorie Blamey's Wild Flowers by Colour* (1997), an ambitious guide to 'easy flower identification', and lastly, *Wild Flowers of Britain & Ireland* (2003), back with Richard and

Alastair Fitter again. This was painted when she was 85, and covers, for the first time, grasses, sedges and ferns, together with a host of new ideas. It is still one of the key field guides. Even in her nursing home she told one of us (TN) that she really wanted to paint for a book on the plants of the Isles of Scilly.

Most of us acknowledge the ability of a watercolour drawing to give a three-dimensional representation of a plant, as opposed to the flatness of a photograph. We all have our favourite illustrator, with some wedded to Keble Martin and others to Garrard & Streeter, and certainly Collins did her no favour with some of the colour reproductions in the earlier volumes. But no other illustrator has matched her skill with such an amazing output, coupled with her lovely little vignettes. She was awarded an MBE in 2007, at age 89, and won three Gold Medals from the RHS and two from the Alpine Garden Society. Her books were translated into at least 10 languages, including Japanese. She had been a BSBI member at various times. Her original works are in public and private collections, and we even found some on the walls of holiday houses on Tresco when we visited this year.

After Philip died in 2014, in her increasing blindness Marjorie decided to go into a nursing home near her family in Wadebridge, where one of us (TN) visited her regularly. Although 100 she was as sharp as anything; when we tried to describe a yellow Clematis naturalised on the dunes nearby, and couldn't think of the name, she immediately said 'Ah, yes, *Clematis tangutica*'! She died, after a short illness, on 8 September 2019, aged 101. In old age her memories of the farm, her Guernsey cows, the plants, birds and butterflies that she had seen, and in many cases incorporated into her botanical illustrations, remained as fresh as ever. It was lovely to reminisce with her, and she leaves a treasure trove of books.

We would like to acknowledge the help that we have had from Anne Irons, Marjorie's daughter, Chris Grey-Wilson and Alastair Fitter.

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Tina Nightingale & David Pearman