

OBITUARIES

ROBERT EDWIN CHRISTOPHER (CHRIS) FERREIRA (1931–2019)



Tall, blonde, wearing a denim jacket and with a small shoulder bag, an athletic build and a hushed, yet excited voice, my first impressions were that this man was going to be different. I was working for the Nature Conservancy Council and my colleagues and I were meeting Chris Ferreira to survey peatland in what had become known as the ‘Flow Country’. For my colleagues and I this was work. For Chris, that hushed excitement anticipated something more than work. I think that whenever plants were involved work was a privilege for Chris, even when he was elderly and liver problems were wearing him down. There was often that hushed excitement in his voice. An excitement when talking about his friends, both in the UK and South Africa, about commercial ships passing the coast of Caithness and of course about plants.

Dr Chris Ferreira, who has died aged 87, was uniquely skilled and versatile as a botanist and geologist and was also a philanthropist. Yet few beyond his immediate circle of friends and colleagues appreciated the impact and reach of his work. He was born on 30 August 1931 in the Lake District, where his parents, Edwin and Jessica (née Robinson), owned St Catherine’s estate, north of Windermere. In 1987, after the death of his mother, Chris gifted the estate to the National Trust.

Chris went to school at Charterhouse and then studied botany at Exeter University. A year after taking his PhD in 1958 at the University of Aberdeen he produced one of the first papers on ‘Scottish mountain vegetation in relation to geology’ in the *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh* (37: 229–250). This is a classic study of geobotany, for it describes the key importance of calcium availability and release in the soil as a significant determinant of the richness of plants in the uplands. As part of his doctoral research Chris explored the western outcrops of Ben Hope, the most northerly ‘Munro’ in Scotland. Despite a self-confessed fear of heights Chris relocated *Salix reticulata*, widely recognised today as being a calcicole, but in 1957 the study of geobotany was still in its infancy.

Chris’s first professional post came in 1960, with the Nature Conservancy, as an upland botanist. In 1970 he produced the first detailed vegetation map of the Isle of Rum National Nature Reserve, a map which is still used today as a baseline for monitoring. Chris went on to develop expertise in the distribution of birch woodland and associated plant communities.

Whilst studying in the wilds of Scotland, Chris determined to devote much of his energy to support the developing nations in Africa. He worked initially

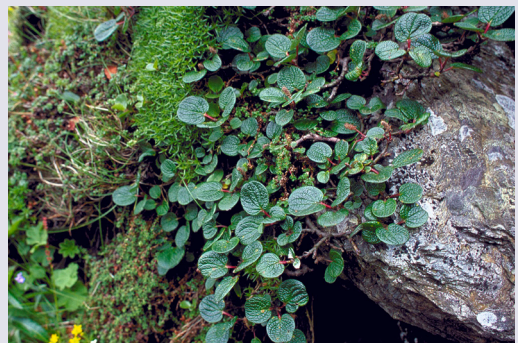


Photo of Chris Ferreira: Alastair Burn-Murdoch
Above: *Salix reticulata* on Ben Lawers. Lorne Gill/SNH

with VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas, to whom he left most of his estate) and eventually secured employment assisting with agricultural development, initially in Zambia. This sparked a love of Africa and its people, which developed into a life-long interest in supporting many emerging nations – especially children through formal education. Unfortunately, his time in Africa was cut short by liver problems and medical advice to leave the tropical environment. However, he maintained his interests and contacts with Africa and its political leaders and formed a close association and friendship with Nelson Mandela (‘Madiba’) and family and helped fund various enterprises. Chris was extremely modest about his work in Africa, yet he must have made a positive difference. Once when I asked about his work, he stood up and in that soft voice he produced both a letter and a watch presented to him by Madiba as a gift.

On recovering his health back in the UK and eager to use his botanical expertise and experience, Chris approached the Nature Conservancy Council’s North West Regional HQ in Inverness, with the offer of carrying out botanical survey work. With his well-established reputation, this was gratefully accepted. There followed annual, piecemeal contracts for thirteen years, resulting in reports identifying individual sites in the NW Highlands with detailed botanical and ecological descriptions. Such was the rigour of this work that sites were readily evaluated for protection as national and international sites of conservation importance. That is how I first came to meet Chris. His maps and species records identified the core areas and were a focus of our conservation effort in the Flow Country.

Field work continued until 1990, with final reports, produced in 1995, giving rise to a

remarkable treatise on the vegetation and soils which contained an exceptional body of work on geobotany – which to this day is quarried frequently for data and insight. Chris found many interesting species, sometimes in the company of friends such as Grant Roger, sometimes alone, miles from the nearest public road. Numerous county firsts over a fifty-year period include *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* subsp. *hebridensis* in East Cornwall, *Equisetum* × *trachyodon* in north-west Sutherland and, whilst in the company of his friend Alex Scott, *Linnaea borealis* unexpectedly growing in birch-dominated boulder scree in north-west Sutherland.

Shipping was a great passion and Chris always chose to live by the sea, whether in Falmouth, Caithness or Kyle of Lochalsh. He would expound enthusiastically on all aspects of commercial shipping, as well as his wider interests in politics, classical music and Scottish Country Dance bands.

Chris spent his last years in the Wick Care Home and remained mentally sharp. It was a shock that he suffered a heart attack and died on 2 August 2019, only four weeks before his 88th birthday. A pioneering geobotanist and generous philanthropist with a breadth and depth of knowledge across many areas, Chris is missed by friends and neighbours who knew him; yet many more would acknowledge their debt to him had they appreciated the depth and range of his work.

This obituary is based upon an earlier obituary published in *The Guardian* and written by Peter Tilbrook, Terry Keatinge, Stewart Angus and Alex Scott.

Iain Macdonald