

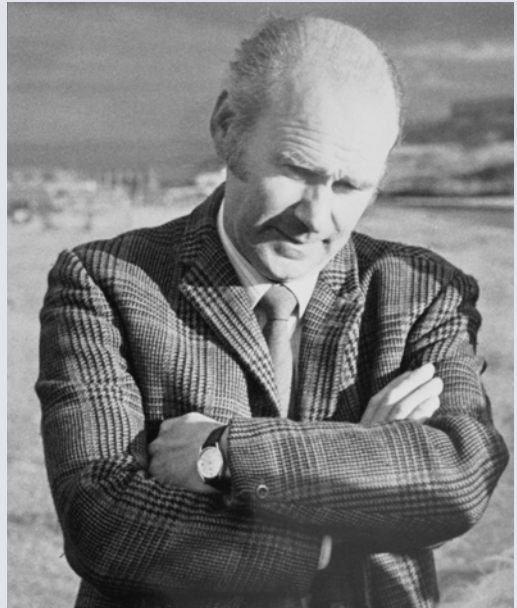
## OBITUARIES

## GEORGE HODGE BALLANTYNE (1934–2020)

George Ballantyne, who died in 2020, was known to many as a dedicated Vice-county Recorder for Fife and as a longstanding referee for Scottish *Rubus* specimens. All those who knew him will have been saddened by the news of his death.

George Ballantyne was born in Kirkcaldy on 14 November 1934. His father John was an ironmonger. His mother Helen, a secretary, is remembered as a well-read and articulate lady with a particular interest in the works of Walter Scott. George's first botanical memory was of his mother collecting a bunch of early purple orchids to adorn the piano – but not for long, as it soon became apparent that it stank of cats (Ballantyne, 1996). George, a Fifer through and through, was to live in Kirkcaldy for most of his 85 years; even his holidays were not spent too far from the 'Lang Toun'. One of the few periods when he lived elsewhere was during the Second World War when it was decided that it was safer for him to spend a few years with an aunt in the Borders village of Midlem, Roxburghshire. It was here, when exploring the area round the village, that he began to become interested in the countryside. He returned to attend Kirkcaldy High School and it was at a summer dance at the School that he met his future wife Eileen, who he married in 1956. George's second significant period away from Fife was during his National Service, when he ended up driving tanks in Korea.

In a brief and characteristically modest reference to his school days (Ballantyne, 1986), George said that 'I did manage to scrape a pass in Biology (lower) at school, but I failed miserably in pure science subjects and maths. What bent I have is towards literature, a fact reflected in my profession, that of librarian'. After initial posts in the county library service in Fife and with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, George was employed from 1968 by the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet, a private society of Scottish solicitors dating from 1594, as Librarian at the historic Signet Library. His book, *The Signet*



George Ballantyne, 1984. Kirkcaldy Naturalists' Society

*Library Edinburgh and its Librarians 1722–1972*, was published in 1979 and for this he was awarded the degree of M.A. from Strathclyde University. Another notable work of scholarship was *The Session Papers of James Boswell ... in the Signet Library and the Advocates' Library Edinburgh*, a catalogue of papers dealing with the civil law cases involving the lawyer James Boswell, Dr Johnson's biographer. The task of compilation proved to be 'more toilsome' than George had expected, as those Papers in the Signet Library alone had to be found initially amongst the Library's 696 bound volumes covering the relevant period, which were neither ordered chronologically nor indexed by advocate. A further 300 volumes then turned up in a basement cellar of the Library. The catalogue not only includes bibliographical descriptions of the Papers but also pithy summaries of the cases themselves. The catalogue, initially a typescript, is now available on-line. In 1969 George became a founder member of the British & Irish

Association of Law Librarians. He retired, earlier than expected because of ill-health, in 1994.

In several papers (e.g. Ballantyne, 1996) George dates the start of his interest in wild flowers to the mid-1950s, and implies that he began to botanise in 1955. After a couple of years he was given a copy of McClintock & Fitter's *The Pocket Guide to Wild Flowers* (published in 1956) and this helped him to make progress. He joined the BSBI in 1960 and by 1967 he was leading a botanical excursion to Dumbarrie Links (Ballantyne, 1968). On field meetings he was noted for the patient way in which he would explain the technicalities of plant identification. He became Vice-county Recorder for Fife in 1969 when his predecessor, Win Muirhead, was rather unusually 'asked to step down'. The vice-county comprises the historically separate areas of Fife and Kinross.

For the next 40 years George was sole Recorder for Fife and very active in the role. His major publications were *The Flowering Plants of Kirkcaldy and District* (1970), *The Flowering Plants of Kinross* (1977, with a second edition in 1985), long papers on the more interesting

plants of West Fife (1990) and changes in the flora of Balmerino parish over 150 years (1991) and *Wild Flowers in Fife and Kinross* (2002a). He wrote about *Orobanche alba*, very rare in Fife, and the apparent spread of *Limosella aquatica* (Ballantyne, 1992; Leach et al., 1994). He became a regular exhibitor at the BSS/BSBI Scottish Exhibition Meeting and he frequently supplied articles for the annual *BSBI Scottish Newsletter*. These elegantly written pieces covered a wide range of topics and often put his own observations into a detailed historical context. I have enjoyed reading them while preparing this obituary and I was surprised that several included autobiographical information, as George always seemed rather reticent in conversation. The last of them was written, literally, about his local patch, and discussed weeds in the potato patch he had cultivated for over 30 years (Ballantyne, 2016). He was a most conscientious correspondent, and when queries were mailed to all Vice-county Recorders a reply written in his rather crabbed hand-writing was normally amongst the first responses. When



George Ballantyne (second from right) at a field meeting of Kirkcaldy Naturalists' Society in 1984.

thanked in person for his help he would normally shrug off the thanks with a self-depreciatory remark.

George developed three special interests while recorder. Initially he was one of the (then) minority of Scottish botanists who had an interest in alien plants. He developed this in the late 1950s when botanising around the harbour at Kirkcaldy, where grain was unloaded for the neighbouring maltings (Ballantyne, 1996). It led him to compile a detailed historical catalogue of ballast aliens in South Fife (Ballantyne, 1971). His other interests were in roses (*Rosa*) and brambles (*Rubus*), and of these it was the interest in *Rubus* that was to become, alongside the Fife flora, his major botanical preoccupation. He started to send specimens from Fife to E.S. Eedes in 1968 (Ballantyne, 2008) but it was in 1978, when he attended a joint course on *Rosa* and *Rubus* led by Gordon Graham and Alan Newton at Kindrogan (Ballantyne & Graham, 1980), that he became 'hooked' on *Rubus*. From 1980 he undertook annual botanical trips to different areas in Scotland and even into Northumberland (e.g. Ballantyne, 1999; 2002*b*). A lecture on brambles to the first Scottish Recorders' Weekend at Kindrogan in 1983 was subsequently published (Ballantyne, 1984) and from this point he was the acknowledged expert on Scottish brambles. Many of his exhibits and published notes dealt with them. It was at one stage his ambition to produce an atlas of Scottish brambles (Ballantyne, 1996) but in the end he was one of twelve 'regional contributors' to the *Atlas of British and Irish Brambles* (Newton & Randall, 2004). He was able to name a species *Rubus newtonii* after his mentor (Ballantyne, 2002*b*).

The BSBI was not the only society to which George gave long and devoted service. He was a mainstay of the Kirkcaldy Naturalists' Society, editing their centenary publication *The Wildlife and Antiquities of Kirkcaldy District* (1982), to which he contributed the chapter on wild flowers (pp.81–104), and eventually becoming Hon. President. He was similarly involved with the Botanical Society of Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, editing for

the latter the newsletter of their Fife branch, *Fawn*. He also gave decades of service to the Kirkcaldy Rugby Football Club, unusually turning from player to referee in his 20s then returning to playing in his 30s. He sometimes found himself playing in the same team as his elder son Keith or refereeing teams including both sons Keith and Lindsay. He was at various times convener of the Selection Committee, editor of a newsletter *In Touch* and, almost inevitably, co-editor with J.S. Methven of their centenary booklet, *Passes Past and Present* (1973). Keith tells me that his literary skills sometimes verged on the pedantic and there was an ongoing discussion on whether to write 'lines-out' or 'line-outs'.

Sadly, George suffered from ill-health during the latter part of his life and, although he never lost his enthusiasm for botany, his activities became increasingly limited. Even as early as 1986–87 his participation in the BSBI Monitoring Scheme was restricted by ME, or post-viral fatigue (Ballantyne, 1988), and it was this that led to his early retirement. In 2006 he was hit hard by a return of symptoms, almost overnight (Ballantyne, 2007). For some time he was only able to participate in botany vicariously through the fieldwork of his friends, especially Bill Hay, and his fieldwork was further restricted when he suffered a stroke in 2009. In 2010 he suggested that it was time for him to step down as recorder but in fact a co-recorder, Sandy Edwards, was appointed, who gradually took over the role. Had it not been for his ill-health George would surely have completed the flora of Fife which would have been the natural culmination of his work in the county. In April 2020 he suffered a further major stroke and he died, peacefully at home, on 17 July 2020. Fittingly, the celebration of his life was conducted by Sandy Edwards, his successor as Vice-county Recorder, who is a Humanist celebrant.

If you were asked to select one person to illustrate the work of BSBI Recorders in the second half of the 20th century at its best there would be many names to choose from – and George Ballantyne's would certainly be amongst them.

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