

ROBERT DESMOND MEIKLE, OBE, LLB (1923–2021)

R.D. Meikle, always known as Desmond, was one of the most important botanists of the last hundred years and a remarkable character. His superb scientific abilities are confirmed by the colleagues and botanists he helped, while affectionate stories of his charm, wry humour, loyal friendship and mischievous (though always kind) sense of humour would fill a volume the size of *Stace 4!*

In writing this obituary, we have found ourselves overwhelmed with good material. Within Somerset alone we have countless memories and botanical records. In 2014 when Desmond made the decision (after a shaking fall in his precipitous garden) to move into sheltered housing, he was very clear about his wishes and remained very lively and engaged until a final year of repeated illnesses. When he moved he told Jeanne and Tim Webb, with one of his rather toothless grins, ‘I intend to *linger*’ and to all of our delight he did just this. So this piece will attempt to honour his memory on many levels, of science, achievement, history and affection. With restricted space everyone’s favourite Meikle stories must be omitted but we have included brief quotations from the considerable correspondence we have received.

Desmond was born on 18 May 1923 in Newtownards, Co Down into a family with connections on both sides to the linen industry which was of major importance to Northern Ireland in the early 20th century—his father, George Mather Meikle, managed the Irish Tapestry Company which made household textiles. Sadly he died when Desmond and his twin brother Eric Alexander (younger by a couple of minutes) were only six years old, leaving them and their elder brother James Mather to be brought up by their mother Sydney (née Mulligan). She was an enormously beneficial influence in the



Desmond Meikle in the herbarium at Kew. *Loutfy Boulos*

lives of the boys. Part of her background was on the land, and after her husband’s death she became quite reclusive, spending all her time with her sons. This led to a key event in Desmond’s life. When he was nine Sydney took the twins to Kew Gardens for a holiday treat. Desmond was ‘entranced’, and afterwards called the gardens ‘paradise’. His mother also started him gardening and looking at local wild flowers. He always carried in his wallet a tattered scrap of paper with a poem ‘The Nature Lovers’ written out (and authored?) by her, and his lifelong passion for plants clearly owes much to this early influence. All his life he seems to have used her way of thinking as a touchstone for good.

He was tutored at home by an (obviously excellent) retired schoolmistress before going to the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and from there, in 1940, to Trinity College Dublin, achieving an entrance scholarship and a first class honours

degree. His subject in these years was law, and his excellent Latin already caused comment. In later years he was often called on to help more struggling linguists when they had to prepare the descriptions of new species. During the years in Dublin his plant interests also developed strongly through his contacts with the great A.W. Stelfox, and with Prof. H.H. Dixon who gave Desmond a privileged key to Trinity College Botanic Garden. After college he began work in the North as a solicitor, but started botanising in Co Fermanagh with three friends (also Ulstermen), Norman Carrothers, Jack Moon and Robert Davidson. This happy gang of musketeers explored the county flora for some twelve years, up to 1957, and they added some famously good plants to the county list, including *Ranunculus lingua*, *Vaccinium oxycoccos* and most notably *Cirsium heterophyllum*. 'The foursome set a standard [of recording] that has been hard to equal and impossible to surpass' according to Robert Northridge, though the 'sense of fun and freedom' given by the group's adventures in the post-war years is also mentioned.

The most significant shift in Desmond's life had come in 1946, when the gap he perceived between law and justice 'disgusted' him when working as a solicitor and he applied for an English Civil Service job. During the interview he was treated in an offhand, insulting way, and although he was offered the job shortly afterwards, it was too late – the guardian spirit of botany had intervened. Annoyed by his clash with bureaucracy, he went that afternoon to Kew to refresh his spirits in the gardens. There he met Ernest Nelmes (of sedge fame). They had corresponded and now talked. Nelmes, with supernatural foresight, said 'Why don't you get a job here?'. Edgar Milne-Redhead, then in charge of the Kew African Section, became involved and together they persuaded the Keeper of the Herbarium, Dr W.B. Turrill, to take Desmond on as a temporary assistant. He did not leave until his retirement in 1984!

Obituaries have appeared in various publications (including *The Times* and *Irish Naturalists' Journal*) all giving details of his career and achievements. A notably beautifully-written one is by Belyaeva

& Brough (2021). It includes twelve meticulously collated pages listing Desmond's 96 publications (a very difficult task as Desmond himself said he couldn't remember how many papers he had written), the 71 new taxa he described and his 58 new combinations and replacement names, 48 new combinations and replacement names based on the names he published and 10 plants named in his honour (he laughed about these, saying the plant was always the ugliest in its genus). There are also three unpublished works – these were two papers which exist as typescripts in the library at Kew, but the third is more important in this story.

Desmond wrote a fascinating, and in places outrageous, account of his life which he called *Tantus Amor Florum*, distributed to a few close friends with the warning that it must *never* be published. Of course it 'escaped' over the years, and after his death a surprising number of people told us about it and sent us the document. The Webbs, as his executors, decided to obey his wishes, so no extracts will appear here except for his mention in the introductory paragraph of his 'love-affair with flowers', and his statement 'Deprived of flowers I should unquestionably die'. Mercifully he never lost their company, and one of the most touching elements of his memorial lunch was a 'parish bunch' assembled in the hall from different flowers brought by those attending.

His first big Kew task was to go to Nigeria to research the distribution and properties of *Strophanthus sarmmentosus*, a vine containing chemicals thought to be of great medical value and also reported to be used by indigenous peoples as an arrow poison. Significant botanical discoveries were made but the research was finally aborted, leaving Desmond with 'unfinished business' which nagged him for the rest of his life. Back in England he was put in charge of the Europe and Orient (Middle East) section of the Herbarium. This first involved a rather unsatisfactory experience with a tricky sponsor for a Flora of the Greek island of Chios, but led eventually to the *Flora of Cyprus*, appearing in two volumes, the first in 1977 and the second in 1985. This flora is still praised and admired as a superlative work. Eric

Clement says that ‘the descriptions ... are some of the best in any Flora’ and Arthur Chater regards it as ‘the model and best of what [such a work] should be’. Former Cypriot colleagues, including Dr Charalambos Christodoulou, told us that the two volumes are ‘definitely the Bible’ for them, ‘accomplished through the extensive knowledge, the hard work and the persevering insistence of Mr Meikle (qualities of his Irish DNA?)’.

These qualities also made a huge contribution to *The Flora of County Fermanagh* (2012) by R.S. Forbes and R.H. Northridge. Robert Northridge has written to us saying that the ‘thoroughness and accuracy of the [foundation] work of Desmond and his colleagues cannot be exaggerated’. Desmond’s mantra was always ‘Habitat, habitat’ habitat’ – an essential principle for all field botanists, and this fine Flora clearly confirms its importance to everyone involved.

The book best known to most of us is of course BSBI Handbook No 4 *Willows and Poplars* (1984). There have been considerable taxonomic developments since then, often involving Desmond himself collaborating with Dr Belyaeva and others, and naturally we all look forward to an eventual re-issue, but for nearly 40 years this has been a most notable prop and stay as we struggle with this difficult group.

As well as these major achievements Desmond was intimidatingly productive! He wrote many papers, edited the ‘Kew Series’ of handbooks, and was an important contributor as a member of the Editorial Committee of the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. ‘To understand the taxonomic view of a scientist one must know the way of scientific thinking of that person and read between the lines of their publications. Desmond understood that taxonomy could not exist without nomenclature’ (Belyaeva & Craig, 2021) and many of his published papers utilise this understanding and knowledge.

His personal life was always more private. He married Carola Dickinson, the algologist at Kew, in 1960. After her death in 1970 he continued commuting between Kew and Wootton Courtenay



Top: Desmond Meikle botanising on a Cumbrian bog, June 2003. Bottom: with *Cirsium eriophorum* near Selworthy, Somerset. Jeanne Webb

until retiring in 1984. His garden was always a great pleasure and interest, and he played an active part in Somerset botanical recording, contributing both to *The Atlas Flora of Somerset* (1997) and the national ‘Atlas 2000’ scheme. Throughout his retirement years his unstinted kindness and knowledge were

shared at every opportunity, whether identifying a garden plant for a neighbour, teaching Jeanne willow knowledge for Somerset botanists to draw on in the future, or hosting a gloriously cheerful 90th birthday party with plenty of CAKE!

After Desmond's death on 5 February 2021 there was a memorial lunch in Wootton Courteney – a lunch for botanist friends and colleagues and most importantly for his village neighbours – Desmond's final party. It was a joyful occasion with good food, drink and flowers, and an evocative display of photographs, books and memorabilia. For the booklet given to participants Jeanne Webb wrote an excellent account of his life, and the structure of this obituary is based on this. When RF was given her copy she thought of how in Ireland a memorial event programme is ironically referred to as 'the race-card' and was sure Desmond would have enjoyed that.

The appreciative words used by our many correspondents would fill a thesaurus. Both Keith Ferguson and John McNeill, speaking at the

memorial lunch, praised his generosity to them when they were starting out as shy new bugs at Kew. We can only end with our own gratitude for the years we knew him, full of laughs and wisdom. As Alan Leslie summed him up in an email 'He was something of a legend, a real character and a fine botanist'. Thank you, Desmond!

Our thanks to Irina Belyaeva, Charalambos Christodoulou (with other Cypriot colleagues), Arthur Chater, John David, Gemma Douglas, Keith Ferguson, Georgios Hadjikyriakou, Nicholas Hind, Alan Leslie, Charles Nelson (remembering 'uproarious lunches at Glasnevin'), Robert Northridge and Chris Preston.

Reference

Belyaeva, I.V. & Brough, C. 2021. Scientific heritage of Robert Desmond Meikle (1923–2021). *Skvortsovia* 7(3): 24–43.

Ro FitzGerald and Jeanne Webb