

## PHILIP HARRISON OSWALD (1933–2021)

Philip Oswald, who died on 5 May 2021, possessed most of the attributes which John Ray thought were required if one were to investigate botanical matters in a worthwhile and praiseworthy manner. Such a botanist, according to Ray (1670), must have an outstanding intellect and memory, be skilled in languages, both Latin and Greek, and read the writings of Ancient and Modern authors carefully and compare them studiously; he must also be prepared to examine the plants themselves diligently, paying attention to all their parts and exploring their resemblances, differences, tastes, smells and properties. These qualities did indeed make Philip a fine botanist, albeit one who by the time of his death in 2021 was (as he would acknowledge) cast in rather an old-fashioned mould. However, it was not as a botanist but as a superb editor that he made his primary contribution to the work of the BSBI, and for which he was elected to honorary membership of the Society in 2008.

Philip was born in London on 13 April 1933. His paternal grandfather Philip Stanley Oswald and his father, William Harrison Oswald, were Anglican clergymen and his mother Joan Stuart (née Wilson) was the daughter of a clergyman. His parents were living in Nigeria, where his father worked as a missionary, until his mother returned to England



Philip Oswald, July 2013, at Arthur's Meadow, Hunts., a nature reserve named after his uncle Arthur Stanley Oswald. *Bridget R. Smith*

for Philip's birth. His father returned to England permanently in the 1935/36 winter to become Vicar of St Mark's, Oulton Broad, Suffolk, moving to Holy Trinity, Norwich in 1941 and Angmering, Sussex, in 1949. Philip became interested in wild

flowers at an early age, and his first flower book, *Wild Flowers of the Wayside and Woodland* (1936), was purloined from his sister after she had been given it as a birthday present in March 1945. He soon found species which were not included in it, and for these he had to contact his maternal grandmother for help; she was interested in wild flowers and had a copy of C.A. Johns' *Flowers of the Field*. Philip won a scholarship to Eton College in 1946 and made friends with another King's Scholar in the same year, Mark Birchall; by 1950 they were botanising together and Mark persuaded Philip to join the Wild Flower Society. Wilfred Blunt, author of the New Naturalist *The Art of Botanical Illustration* (1950), taught art at Eton and was able to show Philip *Helleborus viridis* and *Leucojum aestivum*. However, the science teaching at Eton was so poor that Philip decided that he would need to specialise in classics if he was to get into university, and it was as a classicist that he won an exhibition to King's College, Cambridge in 1951. He joined the BSBI in 1952.

At King's Philip was fortunate to find that his supervisor in classics was John Raven, an exceptionally able and enthusiastic amateur botanist. Raven invited Philip to join a botanical party which toured Snowdonia, the Yorkshire Dales, Upper Teesdale and the Lake District in the summer of 1953; a photograph in the memoir *John Raven by his friends* (1981) shows the young Philip on this expedition with John Raven, his father Canon Charles Raven, Evan Roberts and Dick Burges. Philip returned to the Lake District in a hawkweed-hunting party led by John Raven in 1954, and in 1955 David Dupree, a friend from Trinity College who was later to rediscover *Senecio paludosus* in England, drove him round Scotland and Ireland in his sports car.

At Cambridge Philip read classics for two years and then, bored with the subject, he studied theology in his third year. He remained an active member of the Church of England throughout his life, but was never tempted to follow the family tradition and seek ordination. After graduating he taught for six years at a range of schools. One of these was a short-lived spell in 1956 at Victoria College, Maadi, Cairo, where the staff were put under house arrest

and later expelled during the Suez Crisis. It was under these circumstances that Philip got to know his future wife Janet Margaret Leigh; they married in 1957 and went to teach in Cyprus. They returned to England in 1960, when Philip joined the Nature Conservancy as the warden of the Rostherne Mere NNR. This was the highest rank he was allowed to hold without a science qualification; however for the first two years he combined his work with study at Stockport College of Further Education to obtain A levels in Botany and Zoology, and thus qualify at the minimum level for the scientific civil service. This allowed him to advance through the Nature Conservancy (later Nature Conservancy Council) as Assistant Regional Officer, then Head of the Education Advisory Sector, Head of the Interpretative Branch, Head of Publicity and finally Communications Officer of the Chief Scientist Directorate. He was based at Attingham Park, Shrewsbury, from 1965 until he reluctantly left Shropshire to live in Cambridge in 1976 and work in the NCC offices at Godwin House, Huntingdon and later in Peterborough. It was in his final post that he was responsible for editing, with the Chief Scientist, Derek Ratcliffe, such influential reports as *Birds, bogs and forestry: The peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland* and *The Flow Country: The peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland* (1988). He also helped negotiate the arrangements for the publication, from 1991 onwards, of the *British Plant Communities* volumes. He retired when NCC was divided into country agencies in 1991, a reorganisation which many suspected had been precipitated by the outspoken reports on the afforestation of the Flow Country.

Philip edited the local journal *Nature in Cambridgeshire* between 1979 and 2000 and he joined the BSBI Publications Committee in 1986, serving until 2018. In 1993, after his retirement, he took over from Arthur Chater as editor of the BSBI Handbooks series, arranging reprints, negotiating with authors about future titles and editing those that came to fruition. He started by seeing *Pondweeds* through the press (1995) and continued with *Dandelions* (1997), *Sea Beans and Nickar Nuts* (2000), the third edition of *Sedges* (2007) and *Water-starworts* (2008). He also edited Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* (1996),

contributing ‘a wealth of anecdotes, historical notes and stylistic improvements’. In dealing with authors he had to tackle some tricky situations, especially in his career at NCC, and he coped with them calmly and dispassionately, able to see the point of view of all sides and skilled at finding a way of satisfying them; in this he was helped by his obvious honesty and integrity. As a copy editor he had the highest standards and was ever-vigilant in ensuring that his authors complied with them, not only checking for obvious errors but also spotting subtle internal contradictions which often allowed him to unearth further problems. When computers came along Philip was quick to appreciate their potential, consistently using characters few of us would employ (such as non-breaking hyphens and spaces) in the documents he submitted for publication. As well as ensuring that the details were correct, he also had the ability to view a book as a whole, appreciating the impact of any one change on other sections. This made him a superb editor, the best I have ever encountered. My one criticism would be that he expected authors to write in a style characteristic of a product of Eton and King’s in the 1950s and tended to edit their prose accordingly. Philip was surprised and delighted when Clive Jermy presented him with a case of wine on behalf of the authors of the *Sedges* handbook, to thank him for all the work he had done for them, but not all authors found it as easy to deal with the intensive and sometimes time-consuming scrutiny to which their text was subjected. Philip was perhaps bemused rather than upset when authors on whose work he spent a great deal of time failed to offer him a single word of thanks. In addition to his editing, he wrote many Latin descriptions and diagnoses and acted as a referee for several journals, taking particular responsibility for checking the Latin descriptions of others.

Philip was, with John Packham, Frank Perring and Charles Sinker, one of a team who initiated the recording for a new flora of the Shropshire region in 1975. They gave a great deal of thought to the recording methods (Packham et al., 1979) although whether they reached the right conclusions is perhaps debateable. Philip contributed a detailed

history of recording in the county to the published flora (Oswald 1985) and to the sister volume for Montgomeryshire (Oswald 1995). After his move to Cambridge his personal botanical work tended to consist of detailed case studies, such as the historical investigation which corrected the persistent misinterpretation of John Ray’s *Lactuca* records (Oswald 2000) or the field survey of the street weeds round his home in Panton Street, Cambridge (Chater et al., 2000). However, he did take on one project of broader scope, translating Ray’s *Catalogus plantarum circa Cantabrigiam nascentium* for an annotated edition which we worked on together (Oswald & Preston 2011). I was particularly pleased that much of the information he had accumulated in a lifetime of study of botany and the classical languages, and hitherto only passed on in conversation, was neatly incorporated into the 2,065 footnotes in that book. He clearly took great satisfaction in writing a book himself after spending so much time editing the works of others, and he was delighted when it was awarded the Society for the History of Natural History’s Thackray medal for 2012. I have given more details of this and his other Cambridgeshire work elsewhere (Preston 2021).

Philip’s time in Cyprus had given him an enthusiasm for the Mediterranean world and he became particularly interested in the flora of Mount Athos, the autonomous monastic peninsula in Greece. He was initially invited in December 1990 to report to the World Wide Fund for Nature on the consequences of a particularly devastating forest fire in the preceding August. He made several later visits, developing an interest which neatly combined his commitments to Christianity, the Greek language and botany. On his final visit, in 2011, he was joined by his son Christopher and grandson Timothy. One of his final publications dealt with the flora of the ‘Holy Mountain’ (Oswald 2020).

When Peter Sell died in 2013, leaving the text for the last two volumes of the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland* in manuscript, a small group of his friends undertook to see the remaining volumes through the press. Philip became the driving force in the group, co-ordinating the activities, assembling our comments

on the text and proof corrections, and liaising with Cambridge University Press. The successful completion of the *Flora*, with the publication of the final volumes in 2014 and 2018, thus owed much to his efforts. It was his last major editing job. By then his wife Janet was in poor health and she died in December 2019. Philip's own health deteriorated in 2020, as his prostate cancer ceased to respond to treatment, and when it became clear that he had not long to live he completed several short papers which he had been intending to write for years, and which are now appearing in print. He was satisfied that he had tied up all these loose ends by the time that he died in Cambridge on 5 May 2021. He will be greatly missed by many botanists, not only as an expert on the classical languages who could be relied upon to devote his full attention to any problems that were referred to him but also as a wise advisor and good friend.

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