

## **Botanising with D. A. Webb**



***Botanising on the Cork-Kerry border, May 1982***

For many years, ‘Webb’, to me, was a small, modest-looking book with which you could identify any wild plant (Webb 1959). Not much by way of pictures; but a quietly inviting book, all the same. A book with descriptions that are, in its author’s lapidary words, “as brief as is consistent with clarity, and as untechnical as is consistent with brevity.”

The first gathering of botanists that I ever attended was a Junior Meeting of the BSBI held in Connemara back in 1964, just a year

after the founding of the Irish Branch. The novelty of the event meant that we were honoured by the appearance of some senior members of the Society. One day, a priest in clerical attire roared up on a motorbike: this was J. J. Moore, a Jesuit, and a lecturer in Botany at UCD. A day or two later, another striking figure appeared, a tall man with a loud laugh and a commanding presence. This, then, was Webb: the man who wrote the book. He was soon the centre of the group, examining our specimens with keen attention. I remember proffering my find of *Carex lasiocarpa*, and Webb's "Ah! That's more like it!" – a pat of approval.

I also remember my surprise at some question being met with "Well... Let's see what Webb says", as he reached out for the book: the man referring to the printed word. The first of so many lessons: always check your text!

I continued to attend meetings of the Irish Branch. One enjoyed the interaction of Professor Webb and Father Moore, each deferring to the other. (These were still the days of "The Ban" – on Catholics entering Trinity College Dublin - and the ripples of the ecumenical movement were only beginning to reach these shores. One had a sense of being at the dawning of a new era).



FIGURE 5.9. The dining-room of the Deanery, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 29 November 1916; the wedding of Lieutenant Horas Tristram Kennedy and Florence Irene Harriet Ovenden. Standing, from left to right: the Bishop of Ossory (J.A.F. Gregg); the Dean of St Patrick's (the bride's father); the bride; G.R. Webb; the bridegroom; I.G.A. Webb; R. Bryce (best man); G. Kennedy; M. Ovenden; A. Boyd. Seated: Mrs Kennedy; D.A. Webb (page); M. Webb (bridesmaid); Mrs Ovenden; Miss Kennedy. Lieutenant Kennedy was killed by shellfire in the Ypres salient on 6 June 1917 (From a photograph in the collection belonging to the late Dr David Webb of Trinity College Dublin.)

***David as page (lower left) at his aunt's wedding.  
Dublin, November 1916.***

This is no time for a biographical sketch, but maybe a few words about David's background would be in order. He was born in Dublin in 1912, into a prosperous family - what he himself described as the 'professional class' (doctors, lawyers, clergy). The family was of Anglican (Church of Ireland) heritage – his maternal grandfather was Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral. You can pick out both grandfather and grandson in this photograph, with David as page at his aunt's wedding. It was taken in Dublin in November 1916. A poignant picture: the bridegroom was killed at the Battle of Ypres the following June.

The family background was Unionist, though David records that, unlike most of his relations, his mother (a very remarkable woman) was a supporter of the Nationalists (John Redmond's party). David could remember seeing 'Vote Unionist' signs in south Dublin, in the general election of 1918. In due course he was sent to Charterhouse, an English public school (as, indeed, one might guess from his accent). He studied as an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin, graduating in 1935, and went on to a study for a doctorate at Cambridge – a place with which he retained a special bond. He came back to Trinity College Dublin as a junior lecturer in the late 1930s - and there he took root.



*Early botanical research on the genus Saxifraga.*

**My real acquaintance with David Webb dates from my years as a student at Trinity College. He was a superb lecturer. One particularly remarkable contribution was his series of lectures on**

the History of Science – a real *tour de force* – I just cannot imagine anyone else doing it.

He also took a personal interest in students as individuals – not just *en masse*. This could include an invitation to join him in his cottage near Oughterard, by the shores of Lough Corrib. This was his base for exploring and recording for the *Flora of Connemara and the Burren*. I remember some demanding trekking in the Twelve Bens. I think the blue denims were already a diagnostic feature. David tended to be lightly shod, and never seemed to mind getting his feet wet. (He quoted with approval the quip- I think it came down from Praeger – that an Irishman's boots needed to have a hole or two to let the water out!)

At the end of a day in the field came one's host's amazing cooking. I would just set the table – and then wait in fear in case I had put the knives and forks the wrong way round. This was a serious matter – and my being left-handed was not accepted as an excuse...

David's hospitality was famous, and I met many people through him. These included a succession of high-calibre botanists from the Other Island: Franklyn Perring, Roy Perry, Arthur Chater, Max Walters. Perring & Walters were Editors of the first *Atlas of the British Flora* (1962, 1976). Walters, Chater and, later, John Akeroyd were all involved with David in work on *Flora Europaea* - undoubtedly his greatest contribution to science.

The *Flora of Connemara and the Burren* and the *Atlas* provided the impetus for a lot of Webb's Irish fieldwork. He criss-crossed the island, endlessly: 10km-square after 10km square, often where no recorder had gone before. I remember him at the wheel, calling out plant names, and me in the front passenger seat, ticking them off. He had a special *ad hoc* classification: '50 mph plants', '30 mph plants' and so on. This may be fine for passengers, but, really, it is not a good idea for drivers. (Concerns about David's impetuous driving date back to long before the final, fatal crash. I can still remember a close shave or two... But who was going to stop him? Who was going to bell the cat?)

*Flora of Connemara and the Burren* was ultimately published in 1983. Today we are celebrating a re-issue, retailing at £57. (Congratulations to Gerry Sharkey, to Cambridge University Press, and to all involved in this venture).

My only joint publication with Webb was a note in the *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, recording two findings of the hybrid *Holcus lanatus* (Yorkshire Fog) x *Holcus mollis* (Creeping Soft-grass). (One specimen, collected near Corofin by Tom Curtis and myself, gets a glancing mention in *Flora of Connemara and the Burren*). It was fascinating to mount the pollen-grains under the microscope and find them all shrunken – a classic feature of hybrids, indicating sterility. We reported these as the first Irish records for the hybrid. However, my pride was soon deflated by a stinging letter from M.A. Farragher, of UCD's School of Agriculture - it would be UCD! -

pointing out that he had already published a record of this taxon from Ireland. Of course, I wrote Farragher a grovelling apology. (He was a leading Irish grass expert and, years later, was kind and helpful to me in my struggles with *Agrostis* and the like.)



*On fieldwork in southern Europe in the 1950s.  
(Photograph by Arthur Chater).*

In the 1950s and 1960s, David took students on field trips to many parts of the Continent. His focus on the genus *Saxifraga* ensured visits to many spectacular mountain ranges. The physical energy and the persona of the man in his prime were summed up for me by an elderly Clarewoman: “Professor Webb! Tall, and straight, and wild, and red-headed, climbing away up on them mountains like a wild goat; sure the girls couldn’t keep up with him.” (That



**was Mrs O'Callaghan of Ballinalacken - doesn't it sound like something out of a Synge play?)**

**On top of the physical energy, David had a prodigious mental energy. He combined a keen intellect and a broad culture. He was a connoisseur of the arts as well as a scientist. I remember he once stated that the two themes of his life's endeavours were the promotion of scholarship and of elegance. He was a lively conversationalist, able to illuminate almost any topic, and a great raconteur.**

**This irrepressible liveliness carried over into his writing – yes, even scientific writing. (Scientific writing has to be disciplined; it does not have feel as though it was composed by a machine). David told me once that he seldom altered a sentence once he had written it. 'Wow!', I thought; such lucid thinking, such skill in expressing it. Working with him was truly an enriching experience.**



***Working on Flora Europaea with John Akeroyd***

**He enriched the life of the Botany Department in so many ways. Odd little jumble sales to raise funds for the herbarium. One year, a week in January brightened by a marmalade-making competition, with David as judge. (One colleague cheated and slipped in a jar she had bought in a shop!) An August day stuck in the office was turned into an occasion simply by everyone being told to come in wearing pink (I've no idea why).**

**David was generous, in an unobtrusive way. I know that he paid, out of his own pocket, the cost of an overseas field trip for at least one impoverished student. (That student was Bill Watts, who eventually succeeded him in the headship of the Botany Department.) David had a remarkable range of friends, and he never ceased to make new friends.**



*In the herbarium of Trinity College Dublin.*

*(Photograph by Andrew Campbell).*

**And yet, he was not always a comfortable presence. There were people he related to, and people he did not. He had his good days and bad days. He was often abrupt, and he had a sharp tongue. He had a sardonic wit that could be savoured by the bystander, if not by the victim. (Picture him in the Senior Common Room in Trinity**

College, deep in his newspaper. The election of a new Provost is approaching. A candidate interrupts him with the anxious question: “Oh David, do you think I’m too old to run for Provost?” David’s response is immediate, and devastating: “It’s not your main disadvantage”).

At a deeper level, David was a loner. I remember mentioning his name to Brendan Kennelly, the poet, whom Webb had befriended. Kennelly’s immediate reaction was “Terribly lonely man!”



***Brendan Kennelly reading his tribute, on 12 August 2012  
(the centenary of D.A.W.'s birth).***

**Brendan summed up some of the tensions and contradictions in David's personality in a short poem, published a few years after his death. It is entitled:**

**'TWO**

**In memory of David Webb.**

**You're a man in two places, David:  
under a cherry tree one April morning  
flowering something fierce after a bad  
Winter and a nothingtowritehomeabout Spring.**

**Head down at first, suddenly you look up  
into ablaze of light and blossom,  
stand there several minutes outside the trap  
of time, pondering. Slowly you move on**

**into a January evening, north end of the Rubrics;  
"Coldest corner of Ireland, days like this,  
cold cutting into marrow and heart";**

**killed in Oxford, buried back o' the Chapel.  
cherryblossom warming the threat of ice  
as if art lit science, science pleased art.'**



*D.A.W. and the author, near Corofin, Co. Clare, summer 1992.*

*(Photograph by Peter Ryan).*

David's curiosity and his appetite for knowledge remained undimmed, even in his eighties. Our last conversation opened in his characteristic style: "Ah Daniel; I want to talk to you about elms." That was nine days before his death. (Sadly, we never had that talk. The fact is that, on the genus *Ulmus*, *An Irish Flora* has misled whole generations. In the first five editions, *Ulmus procera* (English Elm) is the only suckering elm mentioned; it is described as 'frequent, but always planted'. *Ulmus minor* (Small-leaved Elm) appears at last in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition, but is described there and in subsequent editions as 'less frequent than *U. procera*'. I consider the opposite to be true; and I believe that the upshot has been a great deal of erroneous recording of elm taxa in Ireland. This view

is supported e.g. in Paul Green's *Flora of Co. Waterford*. Even in the *New Atlas* (Preston *et al.* 2002), I believe the Irish distribution maps for *U. procera* and *U. minor* bear remarkably little relation to reality. To my mind, the soundest available overview of elm distribution in Ireland is that in Sylvia Reynolds' *A Catalogue of alien plants in Ireland* (2002).

It is always tempting to pick holes in the work of others. I must emphasise that I am not claiming any real expertise in this very difficult group. And do not even think of sending me specimens!

Professor Webb gave two pieces of advice for a budding botanist, in a letter he wrote to my mother when I was about to leave school. I pass them on to you now: "The first is that a good knowledge of German is still of immense value in Science and if he could spend part of a year in a German-speaking country, it would be a useful weapon in his armoury. The second is the idea that he might work in a nursery or in some other place where he will get a practical knowledge of how to handle plants. Many botanists are handicapped by a complete incompatibility to make plants grow". The second piece of advice I took literally, and I pay tribute to the National Botanic Gardens here at Glasnevin for squeezing me in, at the last minute, as a voluntary student labourer. For the first piece of advice: I still have a way to go, but I can at least say *Geehrte Herr Professor: ich danke Ihnen sehr herzlich.*

To conclude: David's contributions to Botany were immense, diverse, and lasting. He was, intellectually, an astonishing all-rounder - a true 'Renaissance man'. His was a fascinating, larger-



than-life personality, to whom I cannot remotely do justice in a short talk – or even in a long one!

### Acknowledgements

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