

OBITUARIES

EDMUND LAUNERT (1926–2017)

Dr Edmund Launert was born in Muehlhausen in Germany on 28th February 1926 and trained as an electrical engineer at Jena. He served in the German army, and shortly before the end of the war, accompanying a plane load of wounded German soldiers, he was shot down somewhere over the Czech Republic and was found unconscious in a potato field as the only survivor. After a period as a prisoner of war, he realised that he wanted to be an academic scientist. He attended the University of Jena, but then left the GDR and moved to Munich, enrolling at the university there and studying botany, zoology and the history of science. Under the famous Professor Karl Suessenguth, who told him imperiously ‘Launert, you are a botanist!’, he received the exceptional breadth and depth of a traditional German botanical education and got his doctorate. (On hearing about the production of *The vegetative key to the British flora* he

reminded about the Pflanzenleichen Spaziergänge [plant corpse walks] that the Munich students were taken on to learn how to identify the winter remains of plants.) In 1959 he moved to England, joining the staff of the Herbarium, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to work on tropical African Floras, and taking British nationality. One of those fortunate employees to work at a different establishment from the one that employed him, he was based in the Botany Department of the British Museum (Natural History) as it then was. Tropical grasses were his speciality, along with the Marsileaceae, and he edited *Flora Zambesiaca* and contributed to the *Flora of East Tropical Africa*. He retired in 1991. He had joined the BSBI in 1960, and was a frequent reviewer of books for *Watsonia*, but his main impact on the Society was of a different nature.

One of Edmund’s enthusiasms was discovering and fostering the talents of botanical artists, and one of his favourite artists, Annie Farrer (Ann Davies), along with Roger Gorringe, illustrated his *Hamlyn guide to edible and medicinal plants of Britain and Northern Europe* (1981), a book that has been translated and republished a number of times, and that was an inspiration to several BSBI members. It describes some 500 species, and includes 124 recipes and a great deal of medicinal information. His other most relevant publication is the *Biologisches Wörterbuch: Deutsch-Englisch, Englisch-Deutsch*, published by Ulmer (1998), covering some 45,000 biological terms. *The manual of cultivated orchid species* that he wrote with Helmut Bechtel and Phillip Cribb went through a number of editions and was translated into German by him. A remarkable polymath, he also published authoritative books on antique scent bottles and Andachtsbilder (small decorative German devotional pictures) which he also collected, as well as mortars and other topics. He and his wife Jean walked the streets of London and knew them in extraordinary detail. The foibles of his colleagues and other botanists were an abiding preoccupation, and it is a great pity (though perhaps a relief to some) that he resisted pressures to write his memoirs.

On a more personal level, Edmund befriended many BSBI members, and, as he habitually spent Saturdays



Edmund Launert at the Botany Department of the Natural History Museum.

in his office in the British Museum Herbarium, when the Department was closed to normal visitors, he enabled several of the more active members to work regularly on the specimens and in the Botany Library; those were the happy days when access to the books was almost unlimited. Eric Clement and Sally Foster were in this way greatly helped in compiling their *Alien plants of the British Isles* (1994), and among others he frequently enabled Mary Briggs to work on the

specimens she collected on her botanical tours.

Edmund died on 21st October 2017, and is survived by his wife, and by their children Victor and Frederika and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I am grateful to Jean and Victor, and to Klaus Sattler, for a number of details.

Arthur Chater