

OBITUARY

ALFRED JAMES WILMOTT (1888-1950) was born at Tottenham, Middlesex, on December 31st, 1888. He was the elder son of Alfred John Wilmott, M.A., and had one brother (Bernard) and two sisters. Wilmott's father was a teacher of classics and English at Homerton Training College, Cambridge—a scholarly man interested in many things, including natural history.

From the County High School at Cambridge he went with a scholarship to St John's College, Cambridge. Here a teacher—Maria Dawson—interested him in botany. In 1910 he held the Hutchinson Research Scholarship. He obtained a first in both parts of the Natural Science Tripos. At Cambridge he became a field naturalist and was at first interested in lepidoptera rather than in plants. With kindred spirits he made long expeditions by bicycle to see plants and by night sugaring for moths. He won the Frank Smart prize for the best botany student of his year.

His interest in the taxonomy of the British Flora was stimulated by C. E. Moss, who was then engaged on the *Cambridge British Flora*. To this Wilmott contributed the account of the genus *Atriplex*. When Moss left for South Africa he hoped that Wilmott would carry on the Flora, but the reception of the earlier volumes was not very favourable and the work was discontinued owing to the rise in the cost of printing brought about by the war. Another piece of work done at Cambridge was his method of estimating the evolution of oxygen from water-plants during photosynthesis by counting the bubbles given off by the plant.

After a short time as a demonstrator at Cambridge, Wilmott went to Merton, where he lived with C. B. Williams of the John Innes Horticultural Institution; here he came into close contact with William Bateson—a man for whom he had always the highest esteem, and whose opinion he often quoted with respect in after years.

In 1911 he joined the botanical staff of the British Museum (Natural History). The Keeper at that time was the late Dr. A. B. Rendle, F.R.S., and his colleagues were Mr E. G. Baker, Dr. H. F. Wernham, Mr A. Gepp, and Mr (now Dr.) J. Ramsbottom.

Wilmott's work at first consisted in the removal of the European phanerogams from the General Herbarium. They were added to the separate British Herbarium in the so-called New Room at the Museum. To the development of this collection he devoted the greater part of his working life and his energies, and, in the course of this work, he achieved a reputation among scientists in this country as the leading student of the taxonomy of the British Flora. Many herbaria, especially those of Salmon, Lacaita and Pugsley, came in as legacies, and the British collection at the Museum became the largest and most complete of its kind—it is his real monument. A less conscientious man might

easily have laid his herbarium work aside to write impressive books, and Wilmott seemed to be conscious of this, as he often said that, while he had built up the herbarium, only his successor would have the time to do much research work with it. His diaries show much time devoted to laying out and cutting up herbarium sheets. During his early years at the Museum he edited the tenth edition of Babington's *Manual of British Botany*, which is still a standard work on the flora. In this he was strictly bound by Mrs Babington's instructions. He worked out the collections made near Salonika, in the 1914 war, by J. Ramsbottom and others, but unfortunately, unlike many smaller collections from the area, the records were never published in full. Later he became friendly with Mr C. C. Lacaïta, an Anglo-Italian botanist, once member of parliament for Dundee, who resided sometimes at Selham (Sussex) and sometimes in Calabria, and was a man of great distinction and intelligence. With Lacaïta, Wilmott made, in 1927, a collecting expedition to Spain, and brought back 2000 specimens, collected in the short space of ten weeks. They were continuously on the move and Wilmott had often to work till midnight drying his plants. He did not get quite as many as in 1916 when he went with T. Lofthouse to the Sierra Nevada and collected 3000 specimens. Pressure of other work, mainly naming collections for other people, made him lay much of this material aside unnamed. However, a few new species were described. A number of the collections he named were from the Arctic and included the Cambridge Expedition to Spitzbergen, and expeditions to Iceland, Jan Mayen, and Greenland. He became Deputy Keeper of the Department on 1 April 1931, and much of his time was taken up with naming single specimens for all kinds of visitors.

His best discovery in Britain was probably *Myosotis sicula*, which he recognised in the field; he also pointed out the difference between the two Irish orchids referred to *Spiranthes Romanzoffiana*, and worked on critical genera such as *Sorbus*, *Rhinanthus*, and *Salicornia*. He had very lucid ideas on the philosophic basis of taxonomic botany, but was rather liable to be led by preconceived phytogeographical theories into assuming that every British plant was likely to be slightly different from its continental representative and therefore to be a potential unsegregated species. He once said: "Only when geneticists and cytologists are also competent taxonomists shall we obtain useful results. Good taxonomists are anxious to use genetical, cytological, and ecological knowledge." Over a period of many years he made collecting trips with the late Mr F. Druce in Britain. He was a believer in the survival of a relict glacial flora and the chief exponent of this theory in this country.

The Botanical Society owes much to Wilmott. He edited the *Report*, at first jointly with E. C. Wallace from 1941 to 1944, and later, 1945-1947, alone. He also became acting Honorary Secretary during the difficult period 1941-1946, when he helped to keep the society alive. For years he was a familiar figure at Field Meetings and named at sight many

critical plants for members of the society. Latterly he sought release from these activities to allow more time for his botanical work. He planned a revision of *Salicornia*, which he had studied for many years, and was starting to collect material of *Erophila* and *Ranunculus auricomus*. His photographs of Orchids and Salicornias, taken with a Leica camera, were very fine. He had a fine library, and hoped that, after his retirement from the Museum, it would enable him to write a new British Flora. The idea of a new edition of Nyman's *Conspectus*, which had appealed to him in his early days, had been abandoned. Wilmott was interested in the protection of rare British species, and strongly opposed to the deliberate naturalisation of foreign species.

He was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society in 1911 and was a regular attendant at their meetings, where he often contributed to the discussions. Wilmott served on the council and gave two of the lectures on systematics in recent series. He was a member of the committee, which arranged for the photographing of the Linnean collections in 1941. At the meeting following his death, the Vice-President (Mr F. Stern) paid a handsome tribute to his memory. He was an F.R.G.S., member of the School Nature Study Union, and at one time lectured at Birkbeck College.

Wilmott was a very considerable athlete. At Cambridge he played football, but a displaced cartilage in his knee incapacitated him from the more violent forms of exercise at an early age. He was also a fine cricketer and athlete; a good billiards player and shot with a miniature rifle. At table tennis he played for England, and was Veteran Singles Champion in 1934-35. In addition he contributed to the mechanics of the game and invented the system of testing balls at International matches. He was very musical and played the piano.

Wilmott's appearance was extremely robust, with a fresh complexion and a thick mat of stiffly erect grey hairs. He was, however, suffering from angina, and latterly had to rest even on the short walk from the station to the museum. After lecturing at the Linnean Society, he complained of feeling tired and he died quite suddenly in the early hours of January 27th 1950 from coronary thrombosis.

He married Jessie Eveline, daughter of the late Daniel Bell, in 1914, and they had one son, John Wilmott, now with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in Persia.

Obituaries have appeared in *The Times*, 28th January 1950, and *Table Tennis*, 8, no. 8 (April 1950).

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A. H. G. ALSTON.

ALFRED JAMES WILMOTT. With the sudden departure from our midst of A. J. Wilmott, often known as the "Great Man", not only has Systematic Botany in Britain lost the great man of this century, but many people, and especially a large number of members, both professional and amateur of this Society, have lost a great friend. As I write these words, I am reminded that a year ago to-day (June 11th, 1949) he attempted to ascend Ben a' Chuallaich, to join in the search for *Thlaspi alpestre*—a sick man, warned to avoid undue exertion, his determination, his love of Highland hills coupled with his youthful mind which heeded no warnings, took him far up, alone so that he would not hinder others. He so thoroughly enjoyed that day, and it gave him renewed confidence and revived hopes of reaching greater heights.

I am also reminded that as he wandered over the slopes of Schiehallion the day before, pointing out the likes and dislikes of *Pyrola*, or *Listera cordata*, he demonstrated dandelion species based on what he had learned from continental botanists—a prelude to a promised Field Meeting of the future, now alas, an unfinished symphony. As I write that phrase, I realise how it would please him, or how he might have written it, for interwoven with that knowledge and love of flora there were multitudes of melodies. He was no mean musician, could have been a composer, sometimes was an accompanist, and frequently a pianist.

On those summer journeys with the late Mr Francis Druce, to which I was admitted in 1935—they began in 1919—music was a part of the programme after the day's botanising—Chopin Nocturnes beside Loch Rannoch, Greig's "Spring Song" on the north coast near to *Dryas* and *Oxytropis* and *Ajuga pyramidalis*. The tragic death of Mr Druce made a profound impression and he felt the loss of his counsel and was ever grateful for the quiet friendship that evolved from those visits to interesting and remote parts of the British Isles. The contrast was, of course, invaluable, for A.J.W. was highly strung, almost volcanic, and like so many who boast an Irish great-grandmother—he attributed all his irascibility to her. He was himself composed of those contrasts which build up into greatness. Besides his gifts of perception and under-

standing, he had great self-confidence in much that he did—often misinterpreted as conceit—but in the twenty years I knew him I have never met the occasion when his sureness had been misplaced. He was supremely honest, much disliking artifice and exaggeration, and the modern misapplication of such words as terrible, terrific, or tremendous, filled him either with annoyance or amusement. His extraordinary memory—not visual at all, which he constantly regretted—served him so well and was perhaps his most disciplined faculty and valued asset.

He had a working knowledge of several European languages and was fond of travel. He went to Spain twice, first with Lofthouse and in 1927 with Lacaita, and had a week's spring botanising in the Alpes Maritimes, but most of his foreign journeys belonged to his table-tennis activities (see *Table Tennis*, April 1950, p. 7). As a British botanist he was of the few who recognised the indispensability of a knowledge of Foreign and particularly European floras.

He had little time for horticultural ventures but his small garden at Wimbledon was filled with experimental fragments, the most interesting being, perhaps, the collection of *Pulmonaria* species and forms.

In teaching he was always generous and interesting, but was unaware that those seeking information often could not take in the vast amount he was prepared to give as quickly as he himself could have assimilated it. It just did not occur to him that he might be required to say it all over again!

This Society rather tardily made him an Honorary Member in recognition of the great services he rendered it, especially in the war years. It is a matter for regret that he received no wider acknowledgment of his inestimable value in British botany.

Comment has been made that much of his great knowledge died with him, but the very high standards at which he aimed and frequently achieved, coupled with his insistence on accuracy in all that he said or wrote, were not conducive to frequent production of major works. So much, however, remains and much is wrapped up in the writings of other botanists to whom he generously gave from the storehouse of his mind. The enthusiasm with which he inspired many of his colleagues lives on, together with the gratitude that we, who are left, feel for having known him.

M. S. CAMPBELL.

PLATE 2.



A. J. WILMOTT (right) with H. W. PUGSLEY (left), at the B.E.C. Excursion,
Sheppey, 1938.

Photo. M. S. Campbell.