

ERIC VERNON WATSON (1914-1999)

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This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The authors would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Botanical career

Watson's *British Mosses and Liverworts* (1955, with subsequent editions in 1968 and 1981) was by far the most useful introductory guide to identifying mosses and liverworts in Britain during the mid and late 20th century. His consequent influence in developing the identification skills of bryologists during the second half of the 20th century was incalculably great. Watson's own clear and accurate drawings liberally illustrated the text, testimony both to his artistic talent and to an aesthetic appreciation that underpinned his interest in bryophytes. In his words "it is the beauty and intricacy of form which first of all fascinates in moss or liverwort" (1985).

His second book, *Structure and Life of Bryophytes* was published in 1964 with further editions in 1967 and 1971. This volume reviewed much of what was then known about the morphology as well as the ecology, physiology and phytogeography of mosses and liverworts.

Watson joined the British Bryological Society in 1946, was the Society's bibliographer for more than 25 years (1946 -1972) and acted as referee for the Bryaceae and *Philonotis* until his death. He was elected president in 1964-5 and was subsequently made an honorary member.

Family background and biography

Eric Vernon Watson was born in Cranleigh, Surrey on May 12th 1914, the second of three sons born to James George Watson (1873-1931) and Mary Vernon, known as May (*née* Pearson, 1878-1957). James Watson was born in Aberdeen, the third of eleven children born to Alexander Bruce Watson (1839-1912), and Jane (or Jean) *née* Petrie (1849-1929). Jane was a daughter of James Petrie, a stonecutter who employed 12 men at the time of the 1861 Census Return. Alexander Watson was a shipmaster in the merchant service, and James voyaged with his father to India and back as a young boy.



At the age of nineteen James left Aberdeen for South Africa to work in a bank in Cape Town, and was soon taken on by a fellow Aberdonian, engineer and businessman Robert Williams (later Sir Robert Williams, 1860-1938, of Park House, Drumoak, Aberdeenshire). James became manager of his copper mining venture in Katanga, part of the Congo.

May Pearson was the sixth and youngest child of Luke William Pearson (1839-1886), a surveyor's clerk, and Anne Elliot Pearson, known as Annie (*née* Vernon, 1838-1921). In 1871 the Pearsons lived in Hackney, London; by 1881 they had moved to Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. In 1891, five years after her husband's death, Annie was living in High Wycombe, whence she moved to Brixton (1901) and soon after to Ealing where she spent the rest of her long life.

James Watson and May Pearson married at Brentford, Middlesex in 1910, and spent some time in Africa together before May returned to England for the birth of their first son, Bruce (1913-1985). While James continued to spend long periods in Africa, May remained in England and they established a family home in Cranleigh, Surrey, where Eric was born in 1914 and Donald (1918-2005) four years later. The boys grew up in what Donald later described as Arcadian surroundings (1988). The house had extensive gardens and fruit orchards, surrounded by meadows, commons, woods and hills in which the boys roamed freely. Their father returned from Africa infrequently and they sometimes did not see him for years at a stretch.

As a young boy Eric developed a keen interest in ornithology; he and Donald used to set off on long rambles observing and sketching birds. Years later, as an eminent bird artist Donald recalled that in the spring of 1928 Eric had inspired him “to take a proper look at the birds themselves, rather than their nests, and to keep an illustrated diary as he did” (1988). The twelve volumes of Eric’s ‘bird notebooks’ run from 1927 to 1933 and bear eloquent testimony to his already highly developed ability to observe the natural world with patience and appreciation. The writing is vivid and detailed, the watercolour illustrations captivating and increasingly accomplished. For both Eric and Donald their childhood passion became the basis for a lifelong interest and in Donald’s case for his profession.

Eric and his elder brother Bruce attended Cranleigh School, with Donald at the Junior School. Their father died suddenly in 1931, and the family moved to Edinburgh, with Bruce and Eric going ahead to start that autumn as undergraduates at Edinburgh University. Bruce read Geography and Eric read Botany. Letters to their mother relate how much they enjoyed their new life, lodging with a widow who already had twelve children of her own! Eric and Bruce were soon taught to play golf and remained keen golfers for the rest of their lives. In due course May Watson bought a house not far from Granton harbour and moved up with Donald, who started at the Edinburgh Academy. In 1933 Eric and Donald were among the first members of the newly founded Midlothian Ornithological Club. Both helped to set up a bird observatory on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth, and Eric assisted in building the first ‘Heligoland trap’ for catching and ringing migrant birds.

Eric gained his degree (first class B.Sc.) in 1935 and continued at Edinburgh to study for a Ph.D. under the direction of Professor Sir William Wright Smith, Regius Professor of Botany and Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden. By 1935 Eric’s interest in bryology was kindled and he had begun collecting mosses. That summer he visited the Isle of Barra, Outer Hebrides, writing later that “the mosses presented almost a virgin field for investigation” (1939). As a beginner in bryology Watson “found a dour, but kind and helpful mentor in William Young, Keeper of the bryological herbarium at the Royal Botanic Garden”. (“*Ceratodon*, *Ceratodon*, ye’ve brought me *Ceratodon* again”, Young would exclaim when an enthusiastic Watson took him his latest gatherings.). Watson obtained his Ph.D. in 1938, his thesis winning him the Hutton Balfour prize for Botany.

From Edinburgh, Watson went to Liverpool University as a demonstrator (1938-9) where he met his future wife, Joyce Edwards (1920-2009), who was a first-year student. After Liverpool he took a Commonwealth Fellowship at Harvard (1939-40), before returning to England as senior lecturer at Harper Adams Agricultural College, Newport, Shropshire (1941-46). He and Joyce were married in August 1945 and they subsequently had four daughters: Rosemary, Alison, Erica and Jill.

In 1946, Watson joined the staff of Reading University’s Botany Department where he taught and encouraged countless students, many of them going on to become prominent and influential bryologists. Watson was remembered as a kind, patient and inspiring

teacher. He retired as Senior Lecturer in 1979 but continued to have close links with the department, joining field trips and leading bryophyte forays from his home in Goring-on-Thames. Groups of students were made welcome there for over four decades, enjoying croquet and refreshments and in earlier times tennis as well as botanising. A considerable list of species was found in the acre of garden.

Watson's interests and talents extended widely. In 1947 he was a founder member of the Reading Ornithological Club in which he played a major role for the next 50 years and was the only person to hold office throughout the life of the Club, finally as President Emeritus. A gifted landscape water-colourist, he exhibited with the Reading Guild of Artists every year from 1952, gave generously of his time on the committee and wrote a history of the Guild to celebrate its 50th Anniversary.

He read widely and had a deep love and knowledge of poetry, which he would read aloud or recite beautifully. He had a phenomenal memory, a great command of language and a keen sense of humour and was able to conjure up people and events of the distant past with extraordinary vividness and wit. An inspired and prodigious letter writer, he kept up a vast correspondence and from the 1960s onwards also wrote a detailed and almost daily diary.

Watson would sometimes compose a long and amusing narrative verse summing up the disasters and delights of the week with which to entertain students and colleagues on the last evening of a field trip. He was in his element out 'in the field' with his vasculum, binoculars or paints, quite probably all three. Watson was an accomplished all-round botanist who knew the British flora well and was a member of the Linnaean Club until his death. He died of leukaemia on October 25th 1999. His bryophyte herbarium was left to the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh.

References

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