

# William Wilson (1799–1871)

This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field bryologists of the past. The author, **Mark Lawley**, would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content. A more general but at present unfinished *Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* is available online at [www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk)

William Wilson was Britain's leading bryologist in the mid-19th century. Like most bryologists of that period, he paid more attention to mosses than liverworts, and discovered 60 or more mosses new to Britain, Ireland or science. For example, *Dicranella schreberiana*, *Ephemerum sessile*, *Fissidens polyphyllus*, *Homomallium incurvatum*, *Orthodontium gracile*, *Paludella squarrosa*, *Philonotis cernua* (*Bartramidula wilsonii*), *Philonotis marchica* and *Physcomitrium sphaericum* were new to the British or Irish bryoflora, with *Plagiothecium latebricola*, *Scleropodium cespitans* and *Tortula wilsonii* new to science. He also discovered mountain bladder fern (*Cystopteris montana*) on Ben Lawers and was the first botanist to distinguish the two filmy ferns (*Hymenophyllum tunbrigense* and *H. wilsonii*), which he found growing together in Killarney in 1829.

In 1846 he agreed to produce a third edition of W.J. Hooker and Thomas Taylor's *Muscologia*

*Britannica*, and his revision assumed a sufficiently new identity to be published under his own name as *Bryologia Britannica* in 1855. Wilson planned but did not live to complete a second edition, which would have included an additional 100 species discovered in Britain between 1855 and 1870.

Many of Wilson's plants, drawings and letters are at the Natural History Museum in London. Bolton Museum and Art Gallery also has some of his bryophytes. Other papers lie in the archives at New York Botanic Garden, the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth, Warrington Library, the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, the Botany Department at Manchester Museum, and Liverpool Museum.

## Family background

Such a common surname as Wilson makes it frustratingly difficult to establish a reliable pedigree for William Wilson and his relatives. The water is further muddied (and the blood

thickened) by his marriage to a cousin who was born a Wilson. Moreover, the Christian names of Hamlet, William, Mary, and probably also Eliza and Isabel, were popular in the family, cropping up in branches of the Wilson clan (or clans) at Congleton, Manchester and Warrington, and making it still more difficult to be sure of individual identities and family connections.

Nevertheless, William Wilson the botanist was certainly the second-born son of Thomas Wilson (ca 1760–1820), a druggist of Warrington, Lancashire (now in Cheshire) and Mary (née Allen, ca 1772–1855). Thomas doubtless had to know his plants in order to prepare medicines for dispensing, and may have taken his young son with him when he searched for plants in the countryside around Warrington.

Thomas was successful in business, for in 1820 he left £1,000 to his married daughter Ann, before leaving the residue of his estate (including numerous properties) to his widow Mary and two surviving sons William and Hamlet.

Thomas Wilson was probably a son of Hamlet Wilson, husbandman and farmer of Warrington, while his wife Mary was a daughter of John Allen (died 1812), a cotton-manufacturer of Warrington. Thus, William had family connections with the textile trade, an industry with a remarkable number of botanists in its ranks during the 18th and 19th centuries (see *A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* at [www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk)) (Lawley, 2008).

Like Thomas, Mary was a native of Warrington, and they married there in August 1791. In the following year they had their first child, Ann, who married John Sherratt of Congleton in 1808.

Thomas and Mary's second child was Thomas (born in 1794). He probably died young, for he is not mentioned in his father's will of 1820.



△ William Wilson. Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Next was William, born on 7 June 1799, followed by a third son, Hamlet (1802–1874) who became interested in entomology. Hamlet married Mary Williams of Llansantffraid, Denbighshire, in 1838 and they had a daughter Mary (born 1840/41) and a son William Hamlet (1841/2–1883). By 1861, and in 1871, Hamlet Wilson was living at Plastirion, Llansantffraid, off rents and interest from properties he owned. His son William Hamlet Wilson became a chemist with a general dealer's shop at Brynderwen, Dwygyfylchi, near Penmaenmawr, Caernarvonshire.

William Wilson's family may possibly also have been connected by blood with the Pattens and Wilson-Pattens of Warrington. Perhaps the middle name of William's eldest son, John Leigh Wilson, signifies descent from the Leigh (or Ley)

family of Cheshire, which had been prominent in the county for several centuries. Mary Leigh (ca 1642–1720), daughter of John Leigh of Oughtrington, by Lymm, near Warrington, married Thomas Patten (1638–ca 1684) in Warrington. Their daughter Mary Patten (1674–1704) married Thomas Wilson (1663–1755) at Newchurch, Lancashire, in 1698. This Thomas Wilson was bishop of Sodor and Man. In 1779, a John Leigh of Oughtrington went into business with Thomas Patten in order to refine sugar in Warrington.

In 1697, a Thomas Patten who owned a copper-smelting works at Bank Quay in Warrington had caused the River Mersey to be made navigable to Bank Quay. The Lancastrian Pattens descended from a family of the same name in Lincolnshire and Essex. William Patten (or Waynfflete, ca 1400–1486) of Dagenham, Essex, was bishop of Winchester, Lord High Chancellor of England in 1456, and founded Magdalene College, Oxford.

In a later generation, John Wilson-Patten, Baron Winmarleigh (1802–1892) achieved sufficient prominence as a politician (particularly in connection with reforming industrial relations and factory law) to merit inclusion in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was born John Wilson, a second son of Thomas Wilson (né Patten, ca 1770–1827) of Bank Hall (now the Town Hall), Warrington, who had changed his name in order to inherit estates from the Thomas Wilson (1663–1755) who was bishop of Sodor and Man. These Wilsons changed their surname again to Wilson-Patten in 1823.

William Wilson's descent from these Leighs and Pattens of Cheshire and Lancashire must remain speculative until further genealogical research proves or disproves consanguinity; it is equally possible that John Leigh Wilson acquired his middle name from one of his father's respected colleagues or friends. Fortunately, however, much

archival material remains to be examined (including William Wilson's correspondence), so there is every likelihood that more will be discovered about William's close and distant relatives.

### Biography

William Wilson was educated first at a dame school kept by a Mrs Du Garney, a former actress who had married a French refugee. Later he attended the grammar school at Prestbury, and finally the Dissenters' Academy in Leaf Square, Manchester.

William's family were devout Congregationalists, as was John Rylands (1771–1848), a wire-manufacturer of Warrington. John Rylands and a William Wilson were sometime trustees of Warrington Congregationalists' Chapel, which had been founded in 1776. John Rylands' son, Thomas Glazebrook Rylands (1818–1900), took much interest in natural sciences, including botany, and became co-executor for the estate of Mary Wilson after she died in 1855, and also for William's in 1871.

From the Dissenters' Academy, William was articled to Messrs Barratt and Wilson, solicitors of Manchester. Was this partner Wilson a relative of William's? His cousin and future wife was born Eliza Wilson in Manchester, probably to Hamlet Wilson and Mary [née Lee (Leigh?)]. Perhaps Eliza's father Hamlet was of the same branch of the family that practised law in Manchester. Later in her life, Eliza's widowed mother, Mary (died 1861), lived in Congleton, Cheshire, and finally in the Warrington district. Some of William's immediate antecedents may also have practised law in Warrington, for Thomas, William's father, was 'of *Sankey Street, Warrington*' when he died in 1820, and *Pigot's Directory* for 1828/9 lists Wilson and Bradford as attorneys practising in Sankey Street.

A career in law did not suit William, though, and as he came of a comfortably placed middle-



△ Two species discovered in Britain by William Wilson: *Dicranella schreberiana* (left) and *Scleropodium cespitans* (right).  
Des Callaghan (left) & Ian Atherton (right)

class background, he was able to forsake the profession a few years after his father died. By the mid-1820s, botany occupied much of William's time, and he was corresponding with Sir James Edward Smith, Professor John Stevens Henslow at Cambridge, and William Jackson Hooker at Glasgow. In 1827 Hooker invited him to join his field class for undergraduate students in the Breadalbane hills of Perthshire, and after the week's botanizing Wilson stayed on at the village of Killin until mid-September.

He was back at Killin in late June 1829, at the start of a 9-month tour that also encompassed Wales and Ireland. Wilson sailed from Glasgow for Dublin on 15 July, from where he went to Cork and found *Cyclodictyon laetevirens*, and subsequently at Killarney. He also found *Philonotis cernua* (*Bartramidula wilsonii*) and one of the *Sematophyllum* species in south-west Ireland at this time, as well as new sites for the rare *Daltonia splachnoides*. At the expense of vascular plants, mosses monopolized his attention from this time on.

Back in north-west England, Wilson often botanized around Over, near Delamere Forest, where relatives lived. There he found *Tortula wilsonii* new to science in 1831, as well as *Plagiothecium latebricola*, and *Helodium blandowii*, *Paludella squarrosa* and *Physcomitrium sphaericum* near Knutsford, and in January 1832 he found *Scleropodium cespitans* near his home in

Warrington, recognizing it as new to science. The following year, he found *Orthodontium gracile* at Helsby, Cheshire. And 30 years later, in 1863, Wilson described *Philonotis caespitosa* near Warrington.

Wilson kept journals of his tours in Scotland and Ireland (1827–1829) and for the years 1832–1835; these were donated to Warrington Library after he died. He also corresponded with leading European bryologists such as Lindberg and Schimper, as well as working-class botanists like Edward Hobson, John Martin and John Nowell. Wilson's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* states that he was extremely neat, fastidious, and highly strung, and these characteristics caused him to sustain and preserve a voluminous correspondence. He took interest in the temperance movement, and corresponded with the temperance preacher Frederick Richard Lees, who was father of the botanist Frederick Arnold Lees (1847–1921).

In 1836, Wilson spent several weeks with Joseph Dalton Hooker (W.J. Hooker's son) in the Aberdeenshire hills and on Ben Lomond, but thereafter marriage and the responsibilities of family life curtailed his opportunities for travel.

Wilson married his widowed cousin, Eliza Lane (née Wilson, 1802–1871) at St Pancras, London, in 1836 or 1837. Eliza had previously married William Lane (died 1832), and their

daughter Eliza Ann was christened in Manchester in November 1826. At the time of the 1851 Census Return, Eliza Ann was visiting the family of the physician and amateur bryologist John Bland Wood (1813–1890), whose wife Elizabeth had been born in Manchester. John and Elizabeth's second child was named William Wilson Wood, so perhaps Eliza Ann was related to Elizabeth Wood. Before her marriage to John Bland Wood, Elizabeth's surname had been Jackson. Eliza Ann Lane married the artist Robert Collinson (1832–1890) in 1855; she died in 1872.

By the late 1830s William and Eliza had set up home in Manchester Lane, Warrington. In 1839 they were living at Bruck (Brick?) Cottage, and in 1841 their address was 'Twigger', Manchester Road. They are also said to have lived for some years at Orford Mount, which was presumably near Orford Hall, for long the Blackburne family's residence, of whom Anna Blackburne (1726–1793) was an accomplished botanist and correspondent of Linnaeus and other naturalists.

William and Eliza's first child was John Leigh Wilson. The Census Return of 1841 gives his age as three and a half, putting his birth in or about December 1837, whereas he was said to be 50 when he died in January 1886. He married Edith Maria Challis at Kensington in 1868, but Edith died in 1871, aged 29. John married again in 1873, to Lucy Wilson, daughter of Thomas Wilson, silk mercer of Frodsham, Cheshire, but the marriage failed, and they lived apart from the mid-1870s. In 1871 (presumably after his first wife died) John was 'of Paddington', and he was living at Padgate, Warrington in 1873. At the time of his death he was living in Bewsey Street, Warrington. He was a civil engineer, and had been connected with the Civil Service in Madras, India.

William and Eliza's second child, Isabel, was born in November 1839, followed by William Hooker Wilson (born August 1841, died December 1841) and Ada Mary (1843–1859). At the time of the 1851 Census Return, John and the two girls were living with their parents in Manchester Road. William and Eliza moved into Paddington House (a large residence which is now a hotel) after William's mother died in 1855.

Isabel was listed as an 'artistic scholar' in the 1861 Census. She remained single and lived with her parents until they died in 1871. William died just before the 1871 Census, leaving an estate valued at less than £10,000, and was buried in the non-conformist burial ground at High Cliff, near Warrington. Eliza followed him to the grave in December of that year. Soon after, in June 1872, Isabel married Josiah Pemberton Williams (ca 1817–1887). In 1886 they were living at Sleaforth, near Liverpool.

This somewhat tedious account of William Wilson's family background and circumstances is justified by the paucity of details which have previously been published about him. Apparently insignificant facts and clues may encourage others to follow up and contribute to what is known about this seminal figure in the history of British bryology, who merits a full-scale biography. Many family connections remain to be elucidated or confirmed, and perusal of his letters would surely also add much to what is known of his life and activities.

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#### Reference

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