

## HENRY HERBERT KNIGHT (1862-1944)

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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/>

### *Bryological career*

Knight was eminent among an unprecedentedly large cohort of field-bryologists born early in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and achieving adulthood by the end of that century. They were sufficiently numerous and enthusiastic to make foundation of the Moss Exchange Club feasible in 1896.

Knight's expertise in identifying bryophytes attracted such respect from his peers that he became the club's distributor of mosses in 1909-10. In 1911 he became referee for hepatics, and held that position until 1933, when deteriorating eye-sight obliged him to resign. In addition, he acted as excursion secretary for the British Bryological Society (founded in 1923 to succeed the MEC) in 1927, 1930 and 1936 (Graham, 2002), and became President in 1933.

Knight found no bryophytes new to science, but compiled highly regarded regional bryofloras for Carmarthenshire (South Wales) and Gloucestershire. He found *Cephaloziella baumgartneri* in Gloucestershire, and *C. dentata* in Cornwall in 1926. In Scotland he found *Anastrophyllum joergensenii* in Sutherland in 1921, *Gymnomitrium apiculatum* on Ben Nevis, and *Jungermannia polaris* and *Tritomaria polita* in Perthshire.

The National Museum and Gallery of Wales at Cardiff holds several thousand of his gatherings. Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum and Warwick Museum also have some of his plants.

### *Family background*

On his father's side, Knight came of a family of priests which had long been based in Northamptonshire. The Reverend Joseph Knight (1747-1814) was curate and Rector of Kettering for 40 years, vicar of Geddington with Newton, and sometime chaplain to the Duke of Buccleugh and Queensberry.

Joseph's brother, William (died 1816), owned and farmed land at Kettering, and William's son Titus shared his name with Titus Knight (1719-1793), who was a prominent independent minister at Halifax in Yorkshire. Titus Knight of Halifax worked as a collier in the Shebden mines for twenty years from the age of seven,

during which time he is said to have learnt Greek, Latin, Hebrew and classical history. He became a Methodist preacher at the instigation of his friend John Wesley, but Calvinist leanings caused him to turn independent and deliver sermons at the Tabernacle in London. He returned to Halifax where, having acquired a reputation, Square Chapel was built for him. Titus wrote a poem, *Hhadash Hamischcan*, in response to criticism of the expense of building the new chapel. His son, Reverend Samuel Knight (1759-1822), a fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and first minister of Holy Trinity Church in Halifax published popular devotional manuals. William Knight mentioned Samuel in his will.

Also with Kettering connections, Joseph J. Knight, President of Albion College, South Hackney, a noted figure in London's east end, devoted much of his life to work among the slums and poor. He advocated temperance, and was a close friend and colleague of General William Booth of the Salvation Army. Charles Dickens caricatured him as Anthony Hum in *Pickwick Papers*.

Henry Herbert Knight's paternal grandfather, Joseph, took holy orders, and his son Henry John (1827-1900) was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Henry John in his turn entered the priesthood, and held the living of Abberton and Flyford Flavell in Worcestershire from 1862 until 1896. He probably chose to live and work in Worcestershire because his wife's family came from that region.

Henry John Knight married Frances Elizabeth Allen (1834-1931) at Malvern Link in 1860. She was the eldest daughter of John Allen, gentleman and retired glove-manufacturer of Worcester (1805/6-1875), and Susan (born 1807/8). In 1841 the Allens lived in Bransford Road, Worcester, with John's parents Richard and Elizabeth. John and Susan were still there in 1851, although John had retired by then, and their daughters Frances (Fanny) and Sarah Jane (1836/7-1924) were at boarding school in nearby Powick. By 1861, John and Susan had moved to Cheltenham, where Sarah had recently gone to live after marrying. By 1871 John and Susan had returned to Worcestershire, and were living at Great Malvern, having previously lived at West Malvern.

### *Biography*

HHK was born at Sutton Maddock, between Bridgnorth and Telford in Shropshire, where his father held a curacy early in his clerical career, but shortly afterwards the family moved to Worcestershire. He went to Rossall's School in Lancashire (like his elder brother) from 1874 to 1881, and thence to Cambridge. He graduated with distinction in mathematics, and took up a teaching post at Llandoverly College in Carmarthenshire in 1887, where he taught for 20 years.

There his passion for botany became evident, and he was the first to study in depth the bryoflora of south Wales, particularly his adopted county of Carmarthenshire, not only establishing which species were common and widespread in the region, but also finding many local and rare plants. His *Manuscript Catalogue of Welsh Bryophytes*, completed in 1909, was eventually published posthumously 40 years later.

Knight never married, and in 1907 he retired at the age of 45 and went to live with his mother, by then widowed and living in Cheltenham near her sister's family. Carmarthenshire's loss was Gloucestershire's gain, as Knight, with all the time in the world, began a thorough botanical exploration of his new county and surrounding districts which continued until his declining years. He explored by bicycle, unhurriedly familiarising himself with individual plants in places where he knew them to grow, watching them flourish or decline as the years passed by. By this old-fashioned method, Knight acquired an unsurpassed knowledge of Gloucestershire's plants. How differently we botanise today, rushing from one grid square to another in our insatiable urge for compiling spotty maps!

Knight had joined the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club in 1909, and was one of the group of members which resurrected work on a projected *Flora of Gloucestershire*. He published annual lists in the *Proceedings of the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club*, summarising his bryological findings in papers on mosses (1914) and hepatics (1920), and the 1948 *Flora of Gloucestershire* owes much of its cryptogamic content to Knight. He also contributed substantially to elucidating the bryoflora of the Isle of Wight, which he explored when visiting his brother, who went to live in Ryde after retiring from his teaching post at Lancing College in Sussex.

Knight's relaxed life-style in retirement enabled him to travel more widely, and in later years he acquired a motor car, which he put to good use in transporting other members of the BBS to and from meetings. He accompanied his friend W. E. Nicholson on holidays to Switzerland in 1913, and later to France, Norway and northern Italy. In Sutherland in 1921 they discovered *Anastrophyllum joergensenii* new to Britain. While Nicholson tended to concentrate on liverworts, Knight was equally interested in mosses, lichens and vascular plants, particularly ferns and brambles (Graham, 2002).

By the mid 1930s and with onset of old age, Knight had become less active in field work. As a member of The Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club's editorial subcommittee he concentrated on writing and editing text for the impending *Flora of Gloucestershire*. He presented his herbarium of Gloucestershire bryophytes (870 mosses and 190 liverworts) to Cheltenham Museum, and other material which he collected lies in the National Museum and Gallery of Wales in Cardiff, the County Museum at Warwick, and the School of Plant Sciences at Cambridge (Graham, 2002).

Knight died on January 4<sup>th</sup> 1944, when travel was difficult and folk had much else to concern and distract them, so that representatives of the BBS were unable to attend his funeral in Cheltenham – an additional sadness among friends during the dark and austere days of the Second World War.

Although an excellent all round botanist with a special knowledge of groups such as ferns and brambles, Knight will be best remembered (to quote his friend WR Price) as 'enjoying more than a local reputation as a cryptogamic botanist'. Also, with a shy and retiring disposition, it is easy to underestimate his personal and teaching contributions to British natural history.

### *Bibliography*

Graham, J.J., (2002). 'Henri Herbert Knight (1862-1944). Carmarthenshire's first resident cryptogamic botanist.' *The Bulletin of the Llanelli Naturalists* 6: 10-15.