

## WILLIAM ROBERT SHERRIN (1871-1955)

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This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author 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*

Sherrin's importance to bryology lay "not so much in his taxonomic work, for his determinations tended to be impulsive rather than critical, but in the immense help and encouragement that he gave to beginners, and the interest that he aroused amongst amateurs in the London district." (*Bulletin of the British Bryological Society*, 42: 25). Numerous younger people met him through his work at the South London Botanical Institute, including Paul Richards and Ted Wallace, both of whom were to seminally influence the British Bryological Society's development after the Second World War.

Sherrin was a general naturalist, and particularly interested in mammals, birds, molluscs, butterflies and moths, beetles, bryophytes and vascular plants. He first became interested in mosses through examining those which had been used to stuff mammals for despatch to the British Museum in London, and he had begun to collect them himself by 1900. He joined the Moss Exchange Club in 1905/6, was elected to honorary membership in 1908, and became President of the British Bryological Society from 1945 until 1947.

In 1916 the School Nature Study Union issued his booklet *Study of Mosses in the London District*, illustrated with his own sketches. Sherrin became an authority on the genus *Sphagnum*, and was a referee on that and other genera for the BBS. He prepared *An Illustrated Handbook of British Sphagna* (1927).

Sherrin donated his herbarium of *Sphagnum* species (1,360 sheets, comprising over 4,300 separate gatherings) to the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew in 1948. His plants are now at the Natural History Museum and South London Botanical Institute in London, with further material at Cardiff, Oxford and Queen Mary College London.

### *Family background and biography*

William Sherrin was born in Twickenham, Middlesex on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1871, the fourth child of seven born to John Sherrin (1819-1896) and Decima Blunt (*née* Vaughan, c.1835-1909). Decima married firstly Edward Herbert Edwards (1831-1862), and subsequently

John Sherrin in 1865. William Sherrin's six siblings were John (born 1867), Daniel (1868-1940), Christiana (1870), Joseph Matthew V. (1872/3, who became a commercial clerk), Thomas Vaughan (1875) and Martha (1878). Daniel became a landscape artist, *bon viveur* and prankster, and his son Reginald Daniel Sherrin (1891-1971) also became a professional artist. Thomas Vaughan was an electrical engineer in 1901, married to Amelia Margaret (*née* Hume), but Amelia died in 1901, Thomas married Sarah Alice Markham the following year, and by 1911 he was a taxidermist at the Natural history Museum.

John Sherrin (William's father) was a landscape watercolour artist and illustrator, son of John Sherrin (born 1795), a florist, and Christiana (*née* Williamson, 1796-1851).

Decima was the eleventh child of thirteen born to the Reverend John Vaughan (1792-1860) and Elizabeth (*née* Marychurch, c.1797-1869). John and Elizabeth's Vaughan's other children included Elizabeth (born 1819/20), Mary (1821/2), Matthew (1823), Mark (1826/7), Rhoda (1829/30), Lydia (1832), Joseph M. (1835/6) and Dorcas (1838). Matthew and Mark both trained for the priesthood, like their father John, who was the only son of John Vaughan, a shipping merchant of Bristol. Decima's father John was first curate at Great Yarmouth, then rector of Holmpton in Yorkshire (1831-4), Upton Lovell in Wiltshire (1834-41), and finally perpetual curate at Brixton (1841-56) before retiring to Regent's Park, London.

In 1871, John and Decima Sherrin lived in Twickenham, London. By 1881 they had moved to 3, Codrington Villas, Ramsgate, Kent, and were still there in 1891. William was thus able to explore the nearby coast and marshes at Thanet during his childhood (when he was regarded as weakly, and in need of open air), and so began his interest in natural history. He was educated at Taplow Grammar School.

William married Kate Elizabeth Honnor (1871-1938, daughter of William Honnor, shoemaker) in 1896; they had two children: Percival William V. (1897-1983, who married Edith C. Gilmour in 1935) and Kathleen Gertrude (1900-1996). In 1901 the family lived at 14a, Southfield Road, Acton, Ealing, London. In 1907 they lived at 58 Hatfield Road, Acton Green, Chiswick, London.

Sherrin ran a taxidermist's shop in Ramsgate, Kent until 1895. He then became an articulator in the Department of Zoology at the British Museum (now the Natural History Museum) in London (like his younger brother Thomas), where he worked on mammals. From 1919 he worked there part-time, transferring to the Department of Botany in 1928 to work on mosses, and remained in charge of the moss collection until 1947, thus completing 52 years of service at the museum. While in the Department of Zoology, he became fascinated by the mosses with which monkeys sent to the museum had been stuffed, which led to H.N. Dixon describing them as occurring "inside monkeys".

Sherrin went part-time at the British Museum in 1919 because he also started work then as curator at the South London Botanical Institute at Tulse Hill, where he continued until his death in 1955. Sherrin spent his mornings at the British Museum, and afternoons and

evenings at the South London Botanical Institute. The Institute offered lectures on Friday evenings, and whole-day excursions on Saturdays. Sherrin often led these excursions, sometimes in collaboration with other societies such as the Essex Field Club and the British Mycological Society.

Sherrin gave innumerable hours of patient instruction to pupils, and by contacting local schools, colleges, churches and other organizations was outstandingly successful in encouraging many young people to take up botany. His charm and infectious enthusiasm induced many of his acolytes to retain their interest in botany for many years.

After Kate Sherrin died in 1938, William married Mabel Emily Elizabeth Simms (1894-1979) in 1943. At the end of Sherrin's life they were living at 323 Norwood Road, London SE24. Mabel married John E. Woodhead in 1964.

Sherrin died on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1955 at St Francis Hospital, East Dulwich, London.

#### *Acknowledgements*

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