

## ELEONORA ARMITAGE (1865-1961)

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This article is one in a series 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*

Eleonora Armitage was a keen and accomplished field-bryologist, and the only female founding member of the Moss Exchange Club in 1896. After Augustin Ley died in 1911, Miss Armitage was indisputably the botanical matriarch of her home county of Herefordshire, and enjoyed contacts with many of the leading botanists of the day. She made numerous notable discoveries in Herefordshire, and wrote papers on the shire's *Sphagnum* mosses in 1923 and liverworts in 1925. She found the rare moss *Anomodon longifolius* near Huntsham Hill in south Herefordshire. Stimulated by the publication of MacVicar's guide to liverworts in 1912 she found *Apometzgeria pubescens* on Huntsham Hill, *Blepharostoma trichophyllum* and *Scapania gracilis* in Chase Wood near Ross, and elsewhere (these species are rare in Herefordshire), *Cephaloziella turneri* in Haugh Wood and Titley, *Harpanthus scutatus* from Penyard Wood near Ross, *Scapania aspera* at the Great Doward, *Cololejeunea rossettiana* on the Great Doward and Backbury Hill near Mordiford, *Marchesinia mackaii* at the Great Doward, *Sphaerocarpos michelii* from Foy and *S. texanus* from Foy, Bridstow, Walford and Weston-under-Penyard, and *Anthoceros agrestis* and *Phaeoceros laevis* in fields about Ross and near Bodenham. Henry Knight (see *Field Bryology* 83:18-21) often accompanied her on botanical excursions after he came to live in the neighbouring county of Gloucestershire.

Miss Armitage became President of the British Bryological Society in 1939.

Her plants are at the universities of Bristol and Manchester, with more than 700 other specimens at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, and 30 at Liverpool Museum. These collections include gatherings sent to her by A.R. Horwood, D.A. Jones, H.H. Knight, L.B.C. Trotter, J.A. Wheldon and others.

### *Family background*

Eleonora Armitage was the fifth surviving child of eight born to Arthur Armitage (1812-1892) and Isabel Jane (*née* Perceval, 1830-1921). Eleonora's siblings were Arthur (who

died at birth on Christmas Day, 1851), Lucy (1852-1941), Isabel Jane (1855-1941, who became sister-in-charge of surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital), Robert (1857-1954, who entered the priesthood and served as chaplain in the armed forces until the age of 55, gaining a D.S.O. in the Boer War, and subsequently becoming vicar of Stanton Lacy near Ludlow from 1922 until 1945), Ernest (1860-1940), then Eleonora herself, followed by Cecilia (1870-1959), Frank (1872-1955, who joined the Indian police, and whose son Sir Robert Perceval Armitage, 1906-1990, became Governor and Command-in-chief of Cyprus in 1954-5, and Governor of Nyasaland in 1956-61), and Arthur Haistwell Armitage (1873-1944, who became a tea-planter in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka).

The family home was Dadnor, Bridstow, near Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, and Eleonora (who did not marry) continued to live there with her younger sister Cecilia for many years after her parents had died, vacating only when the infirmities of old age compelled them to move to smaller premises nearby.

Her father, Arthur, like his own father, was a practising barrister and Receiver of the Herefordshire estates of Guy's Hospital, London, as well as a landed proprietor and farmer of 400 acres. Latterly he was a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant. He was born at Burton Court, Linton, near Ross, the twelfth child of fourteen born to Whaley Armitage (1767-1855), barrister, and Eleonora (*née* Haistwell, 1775-1838). Eleonora Haistwell's parents were Edward (1736-1783, of Kensington, London) and Eleonora (*née* Brickenden, 1749-1820, of Inkpen, Berkshire). Edward Haistwell's paternal grandfather, also Edward (c.1658-1709, see *Dictionary of National Biography*) was a Quaker merchant who became prominent in the early years of the Society of Friends. However, his son did not remain a Quaker.

Whaley Armitage was a son of Robert Armitage (1727-1787) of Kensington, London, who was born in and became a merchant of Liverpool, and Caroline (*née* Braithwaite, 1734-1802), daughter of John Braithwaite (1696-1740), a soldier and diplomatist of sufficient prominence to merit an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. These Braithwaites, like the Haistwells, came from Westmorland. The Armitages had connections with Ireland, and the name of Whaley stems from Richard Chappell (or Chapel) Whaley (c.1700-1769) of Whaley Abbey, MP for Co. Wicklow, who married Catherine, daughter of Robert Braithwaite. Their second daughter, Anne, married John Fitzgibbon, Lord Clare, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl and Lord High Chancellor of Ireland. Richard Whaley, who was very wealthy, descended from Thomas Cromwell, and persecuted Irish Catholics. His son, Thomas Whaley (1766-1800), politician and gambler, continued his father's extravagant life-style (see *Dictionary of National Biography*).

Eleonora's mother, Isabel Jane Perceval, was a daughter of Mary Jane (*née* Bourke, 1802-1888, daughter of General Sir Richard Bourke, 1777-1855, army officer and colonial governor, and another of Eleonora's ancestors who merits entry in the *DNB*) and Dudley Montague Perceval (1800-1856) of St. George Hanover Square, London, who became Deputy Teller of Her Majesty's Exchequer. Dudley Perceval was one of six sons and six daughters born to Spencer Perceval (1762-1812) and Jane (*née* Spencer-Wilson,

1769-1844), daughter of Sir Thomas Spencer Wilson (died 1798) of Charlton House, Kent, and his wife Jane (*née* Weller).

Spencer Perceval, Eleonora's maternal great-grandfather, was a son of John Perceval (1711-1770), politician and 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Egmont, and his second wife Catherine (*née* Compton), daughter of Charles Compton and granddaughter of George Compton, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Northampton. Spencer Perceval was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, became a lawyer, Tory MP for Northampton in 1796, solicitor-general, attorney-general, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and then Prime Minister from 1809 until his death in 1812. Perceval is particularly remembered as the only serving British Prime Minister to be assassinated. He was shot in the lobby of the House of Commons by a disgruntled merchant who blamed the government for the failure of his business.

### *Biography*

Both of Eleonora's parents came from financially comfortable and well-connected families, so her childhood in south Herefordshire was passed in circumstances propitious for extended study of local wildlife. Her father was sufficiently interested in natural history to be elected president in 1879 of the county's most prominent natural history club, the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club. Eleonora never joined that august body, which refused to admit women because it was felt that their charms and wiles might have distracted members from the serious business of the meetings. Fortunately, however, the Moss Exchange Club was less distracted by lady-members in its ranks, perhaps because during its early years members did not arrange any meetings, and their contact with each other was confined to correspondence.

Beyond the family circle, the country around Ross was a fine place for a young naturalist to grow up in Victorian England, with Augustin Ley (1842-1911) - the Welsh border's premier botanist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and a most accomplished bryologist - vicar at nearby Sellack and King's Caple. In addition, Burton Mounsher Watkins (1816-1892), a Relieving Officer for the indigent of Ross, lived in the neighbourhood. He was a fine field-botanist too, and an early student of liverworts. Miss Armitage inherited his annotated copy of M.C. Cooke's *British Hepaticae* after he died.

Eleonora's mother also took interest in natural history, and the Woolhope Club retains some of her water-colour paintings in its library. Eleonora inherited her mother's artistic bent, and illustrated plants to a high standard; her drawings of *Iris* (a genus which particularly interested her) are now at Kew.

As usual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only her brothers were formally educated for the professions, the girls being taught at home. Later, Miss Armitage earned a little money by helping to lay out friends' gardens, working with the gardeners. In her spare time she used to set off by bicycle on her explorations of the countryside, and slept at farmhouses long before the modern habit of "bed and breakfasting" came into fashion. Nor did Miss Armitage confine her explorations to Herefordshire. She was an inveterate traveller, and visited

and collected plants from (*inter alia*) Madeira in 1909, Grand Canary, Tenerife in 1925, Spain (1927), Azores (1930), Norway (1936) and Switzerland (1950). She also visited the Amazon and Spitsbergen, and stayed with her brother Robert when he served as chaplain to the Armed Forces in Barbados (1896) and Egypt.

Apart from her bryology, Miss Armitage was also a very keen gardener. She contributed to the Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society, of which she was a member, and also formed a reading circle of botanists with ecological interests who corresponded with A.G. Tansley. She led Professor Tansley's party at Symond's Yat near Ross, after the fifth International Botanical Congress at Cambridge in 1930. Astronomy and ornithology also interested her, and she was an active member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

A strict Victorian in principles and manners, Eleonora wore the trousers in the Armitage household of later years, and her personality rather intimidated younger members at meetings of the BBS. Nevertheless, she was very interested in other botanists, played an important role in the transformation of the MEC into the BBS in 1923, and wrote a booklet about the history of the Club and Society, which she published at her own expense.

#### *Acknowledgement*

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