ROBERT BRAITHWAITE (1824-1917)

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This 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

Robert Braithwaite was a leading British bryologist in the 19th century. He wrote *Sphagnaceae or Peat-mosses of Europe and North America* (1880), but his lasting contribution to British bryology is his three volumes of *The British Moss-flora* (1887-1905), illustrated by himself.

Braithwaite found the moss *Trematodon ambiguus* near Schiehallion in Perthshire, new to Britain in 1883 and not seen in this country since. His herbarium is at the Natural History Museum in London.

Family background and biography

Braithwaite was born at Ruswarp near Whitby in Yorkshire in 1824, a son of Robert Braithwaite (1795-1854), master mariner, and Sarah (*née* Major, ?1800-1879). Braithwaite Sr. was himself a son of Robert Braithwaite of Ruswarp, who died in 1841. Whitby was an important maritime centre in the 18th and 19th centuries, and both grandfather and father Braithwaite were ship-owners. Grandfather Braithwaite had married Sarah Fishburn, possibly a niece of Thomas Fishburn (died 1805), who built Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour* in 1764.

Robert Braithwaite the bryologist had several brothers and sisters - William, George, Annie, Sarah, Margaret and Alice. After schooling at Whitby, by 1841 Robert was apprenticed to George Holby, a surgeon of Whitby, and then went south to London in 1844, never to return to live in his native Yorkshire. He spent the following ten years as assistant to Dr. John Dalston Jones (c.1811-1869; a surgeon of 4, Queens Row, Hackney, Dalston at the time of the 1851 Census) in east London, before entering University College, London as a medical student. He qualified in 1858, aged 34, taking up practice in Lambeth before moving to Clapham. He retired in 1899, the year after his wife died, but continued to live in London.

Braithwaite's botanical interests very likely sprang from his medical training, for in the 19th century medical men had to familiarise themselves with native plants and their therapeutic and toxic properties. In addition, Braithwaite arrived in London around the time when microscopy was becoming an *avant-garde* interest for polite society. He gained entry to this world through his contact with Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward (1791-1868), who examined in botany at the Chelsea Physic Garden. Ward was elected master there in 1854, the year that Braithwaite began his medical training at college. Ward had in his turn previously attended lectures and classes given there by the charismatic Thomas Wheeler, who also led plant-hunting expeditions into the countryside and fired Ward's enthusiasm for field-botany. Ward practised medicine from his surgery in Wellclose Square in Whitechapel, but is best remembered nowadays for his invention of the Wardian case, which protected house-plants from the filthy atmosphere of Victorian London. Wardian cases also found commercial application in protecting plants from desiccation while being shipped around the world, an idea which applied also to animals.

Nathaniel Ward had married Charlotte Elizabeth (*née* Witte, 1790), daughter of Hans Henrich Witte, who came of a family of German emigrants who prospered as sugar-refiners and merchants in London's East End during the first part of the 19th century. Charlotte, who inherited considerable wealth from her German relatives, may have met Ward through Edwin Hermus Holthouse, a member of another German family with sugar warehouses on the docks, and who became a surgeon and eye-specialist.

Ward was a natural host and raconteur, much interested in microscopy, so bryophytes may well have been subjects for examination and discussion during informal evening gatherings (or "stitching parties", as Ward called them) around the microscope in his house. These *soirées* had spawned the Microscopical Society in 1839, with assistance from Ward's neighbours in Wellclose Square – the brothers Edwin John Quekett (1808-1847) and John Thomas Quekett (1815-1861). The Queketts were also medical men, and founded the Quekett Microscopical Society, of which Braithwaite became an active member, and President in 1872-3. Braithwaite also became President of the South London Microscopical Society (1873-5) and the Royal Microscopical Society (1892-3).

Through these evening gatherings around the microscope, Braithwaite may also have met the Quekett brothers' sister Eliza Catherine (1812-1875), wife of Charles Frederick White (1818-1896). Both Charles and Eliza were interested in mosses and other microscopic botanical subjects.

Indeed, Braithwaite's entire bryological career was based on and moulded around his love of microscopy, kindled by his exposure as a young man to the enthusiasm and camaraderie at Ward's evening parties, and he always remained keener on this aspect of his hobby than on expeditions in the field. H.N. Dixon's delightful obituary of Braithwaite in the *Journal of Botany* recounts that "….Dr Braithwaite was not a great field-botanist. *Trematodon ambiguus* in its lonely outpost on Schiehallion [in central Perthshire] stands to his credit, but I do not think he added much else to our British moss flora. Nor did he ever speak of field-work as if he took much delight in it…. He told

me…. of an expedition with Dr Stirton and Ewing to the Hebrides, when Stirton was to show him the locality, on Benbecula, for some rare or unique *Campylopus* found there thirteen years earlier. Arrived at the spot there was naught but a potato patch to be seen, and the *Campylopus* appeared to have joined the ranks of extinct species. On the return journey they had unpleasant experiences, being nearly overtaken by the tide and nearly or quite benighted by fog. Braithwaite must have looked back on the Outer Hebrides with somewhat similar feelings to Dr Johnson. It could have been no great comfort to him when Dr Stirton wrote later that he found he had taken them to the wrong spot for the *Campylopus*!"

Another of Braithwaite's interests that developed as a result of joining the microscopical medical community of London's East End was Ward's daughter, Charlotte Elizabeth (1825/6-1898), whom he married in 1869, the year after Nathaniel died. Both bride and groom were in their forties by then, and there were no children of the marriage.

With Braithwaite's bryological interests centred mainly on microscopy, he was better known in botanical circles as a correspondent than as a companion in the field. In his tellingly etched obituary of Braithwaite, Dixon wrote: "Genial and generous as he was…. he could feel and resent a slight or injury. Even in what might be supposed the thornless path of bryology, offences *will* come, and one does occasionally in treading that path come across what our American allies expressively term a 'snag'." Braithwaite, it transpires from the obituary, was little interested in intraspecific variation, whereas such varieties were of the utmost importance to Dixon (who superseded Braithwaite as the doyen of British muscologists), "for it happens to be the system on which Nature works." Perhaps Braithwaite's prickly character and indifference to fieldwork were the reasons why he was not elected an honorary member of the Moss Exchange Club. Indeed, he never joined that Club, even as an ordinary member.

Going on to discuss *The British Moss Flora* in his obituary of Braithwaite, Dixon recounts that "this elaborate…. work of art…. bears all the marks of the amateur in the original and highest sense of the word…. and indeed in some measure defeated its own purpose, for [Braithwaite's] intense desire to make it artistically perfect, the high finish of the illustrations, [and]…. elaboration of the synonymy, brought the work to such a size and cost, while at the same time extending …. its publication over so many years as to prejudice very greatly its sale…."

With Braithwaite's bryological career largely behind him by the end of the 19th century, the elderly widower passed his last two decades as a living reminder of a bygone bryological era, remote from the mind-set and activities of a younger generation of bryologists, his one remaining task being to complete his magnificent *Flora*.