

SIR GEORGE TAYLOR
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George Taylor was born on 15 February 1904. Although his parents had strong Ayrshire connections he himself was brought up in Edinburgh. He had a very deep affection for his mother but his relationship with his father was more circumspect. It was based upon an admiration of his father's skill as a decorator well versed in the art of gilding which regrettably didn't win him continuous employment. He learnt from his father to be meticulous, one of the abiding features of Sir George. The notes of many of his speeches, starting in 1927 when he was President of the Biological Society, Edinburgh University, were always written in capitals on pieces of paper of exactly the same size. He clearly thought that if something was worth doing it was worth doing properly. His speeches to prize winning students, retiring members of staff, Portobello Bowling Club or Dundee Angling Club were prepared with as much care as those delivered on more august occasions as when in 1963 he was admitted an Honorary Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Gardeners.

By the time he went to Boroughmuir Secondary School he had had, of necessity, a series of jobs: at one time he helped a fishmonger who, for a morning's work, would give the young George two ham sandwiches - a recompense that significantly lightened the burden on his parents budget. With admirable judgement, teachers at Boroughmuir recognised that George would have to move elsewhere if he were to develop his full potential and happily one of his older sisters, a teacher, accepted the financial responsibility for George's later schooling at George Heriot's School - he never looked back.

At Heriot's, George came under the influence of Mr George Scott, the teacher with responsibility for natural science and, with a degree of inevitability, he made the transition to Edinburgh University. His early involvements suggested that George might become a zoologist but this wasn't to be. At Edinburgh University the course of his life, which baffled his parents, was again influenced by a guru, James R Matthews who won him to the cause of botany. George had a singleness of purpose - he quite literally couldn't afford to fail - but he was not blinkered. In his final undergraduate year he did three projects - a botanical survey of Duddingston Loch, the vegetative propagation of *Acanthus* sp., and a study of anther development in *Erica hirtifolia* - a balanced diet rarely matched at the present time. With his First Class Honours degree in Botany, George won the coveted Vans Dunlop Scholarship worth £100 per year for each of 3 years - riches indeed. He commenced research on the genus *Meconopsis*, under James Matthews, but very soon his abiding interest in travel began to show. With part of the first instalment of his scholarship he purchased a motorcycle so that he could indulge his interest in field botany and then, in the second year (1927/8), he was asked to guide a group of three on a collecting visit to South Africa. The group, including Mr Laurence Johnston of Hidcote Manor fame, returned with collections of heathers, gladioli, ixias and others while George was personally credited with the introduction of *Kniphofia galpinii*, one of the smaller red hot pokers.

George was undoubtedly asked to guide the visit to South Africa in part because of his ability to get on with people, an attribute that was to serve him well. Out there he met Field Marshall Lord Smuts who was no mean botanist, a meeting that was the forerunner of many more with personalities of the day whether royalty, statesmen or colleagues associated with the many aspects of botany, not forgetting the Royal Horticultural Society. However, Sir George never lost the common touch: to the end he maintained a prodigious personal correspondence replying just as happily to members of the lay-public asking what many professional botanists would regard as inane questions as when discussing the approach to, and outcome of, major expeditions with the likes of Frank and Jean Kingdon-Ward, George and Betty Sherriff and Frank Ludlow.

Back in Britain George responded to an advertisement seeking an Assistant Keeper, second class, in the British Museum, Natural History. He was intrigued to find that a sponsor was needed who had to be one of the Museum's Principal Trustees (The Lord Chancellor, the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Archbishop of Canterbury): he chose to approach the Archbishop. At the Museum he started in the herbarium concerned with the 'World other than Europe', but was soon appointed joint leader of the Museum's 1934/5 expedition to East Africa while in 1938 he went to Tibet and Bhutan with Ludlow, Sherriff and Kingdon-Ward. By this time and while sustaining his interests in *Meconopsis* and the *Podostemaceae* (a family of minute plants), Taylor had found his métier, namely the organisation and administration of affairs botanical. However with the outbreak of the Second World War he asked to be released from the Museum and went for an interview at the Air Ministry. To his surprise he was posted to the Finance Branch of the Air Ministry in Yorkshire. If this appointment didn't live up to his expectation of what a fit and active man whose weakest subject was mathematics might contribute to the war effort, it nonetheless allowed him to indulge his interest in field botany to the evident delight of his office colleagues who were introduced to the charm of native orchids and *Primula farinosa* and the fascination of *Potamogeton × suecicus*, a glacial relic.

After the war he returned, not without some misgiving, to the British Museum where he was promoted to Keeper in 1950 and then in 1956 he was approached to succeed Sir Edward Salisbury as Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. On taking-up his appointment, October 1956, he was met by the outgoing Director with 'We had hoped for someone else'. But George had no need to worry. With an adroit sense of liaison and the establishment of the Ashby Committee to review the role of the Gardens, he soon set about reversing the earlier malaise, attributable only in part to the war: he did this with the willing loyalty of staff.

In his speeches George often said that 'we Scots get about and indeed are one of England's most significant imports' - nobody would question his value to Kew and hence to botanical science world-wide. As Director, perceptive, firm and unswervingly true to his word, he rejuvenated the Gardens - the Heath Garden, the refurbished glasshouses including the Palm House, the Queen's Garden, the new Jodrell Laboratory, the improved rock garden, the extension of herbarium facilities and the lease of Wakehurst Place, but even more importantly he re-established a sense of direction and purpose - the lasting testimony to his efforts which were acknowledged in 1962 when he was knighted.

After 1970 he returned to his beloved Scotland while continuing to serve on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Committees of the Ministry of Transport and the Department of Environment to mention but a few. He played a part on the local scene with the Caledonian Horticultural Society, the Scottish Rock Garden Club, and the Haddington Garden Trust, while taking immense pride in developing the gardens at Belhaven House and implementing the wishes of his long-standing friend Stanley Smith, namely the establishment of the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust.

Sir George died on 13 November 1993 having led a very full life. Like many, I had the privilege of absorbing the ambience of Belhaven House in Sir George's company. I have one regret: I never asked him how he managed to avoid the publication of Annual Reports during his Directorship (1956-70) of the Royal Botanic Gardens - he was even more astute than I realised!

FRED LAST