

# CHARLES SCHWEINFURTH

1890-1970

## AN APPRECIATION

Charles Schweinfurth was a gentleman, scholar and scientist. He has made an indelible mark on the science of orchidology, and his influence will be long remembered in the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, the institution which he served for many years.

Born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on April 13, 1890, the only child of Julius Adolf and Mary Frances Schweinfurth, he attended public schools there. Entering Harvard College in 1909, he concentrated in chemistry, although, with his childhood interests in natural history, he did courses in biology, becoming especially drawn to taxonomic botany. After receiving the A.B. degree cum laude in 1913, he devoted the following year to graduate studies at Harvard.

An attack of poliomyelitis during his college years left him slightly paralyzed in the right arm. When he did complete his studies, medical advisors counselled against his following a career involving work in chemical laboratories.

Charles' father, a world renowned architect, was a man of independent means, but his philosophy rebelled at permitting his son to live on accumulated wealth without working. At this time, the Ames Botanical Laboratory in North Easton, Massachusetts, functioning at the home of Professor Oakes Ames, was entering a very active period of research in orchidology. Professor Ames contracted young Schweinfurth in 1914 to care for his living collection of orchids.

It was not long before Ames, recognizing Charles'

extraordinary meticulousness and his uncanny, almost photographic, memory for the orchids, transferred him to his herbarium to aid in the identification of ever increasing shipments of orchid collections arriving from around the world, especially, at that time, from the Philippines and southeast Asia.

Dedicating himself with typical zeal to this new task, Charles became, in a surprisingly short time, proficient in this most complex plant family and was soon recognized as one of the world's leading orchidologists. Orchids remained his prime responsibility for the rest of his life.

When, in 1931, Ames transferred the Orchid Herbarium of Oakes Ames to the Botanical Museum, Charles came to Cambridge and, as Research Associate, spent the rest of his life in the Museum in orchidological research. After retirement, he continued his studies daily on the absolutely precise schedule so typical of his life and philosophy, until they were interrupted by illness about a year before his death.

Filially devoted to the Botanical Museum, 'Schweiny', as he was affectionately known amongst his closest colleagues, gave his time and efforts happily in sundry quiet ways towards the strengthening of this institution. For many years, he assisted in the editing of the *Botanical Museum Leaflets*, setting an example of the strictest accuracy in this work.

Charles' taxonomic and monographic research, including both Old and New World orchids, resulted in voluminous publications, which will long serve as models. His earliest work dealt with the Philippine flora. His basic work with Ames and F. Tracy Hubbard on *Epidendrum* led to a monograph on this complex genus. The major research of his life, however, was embodied in his monumental five volume *Orchids of Peru*, based on investigations that spanned 30 years. This work repre-

PLATE X



*Charles Schwinn*



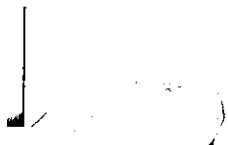
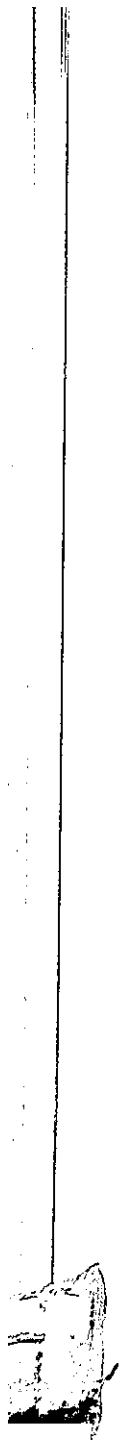
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PLATE XI



CHARLES SCHWEINFURTH

A drawing made by ELMER W. SMITH in 1958.



sents the first orchid flora of an Andean country and, as such, will always remain a basic tool. Published from 1958 to 1961, an addendum appeared only days after his death. This great contribution was recognized when, in 1948, at the Third South American Botanical Congress in Lima, the Peruvian Universidad Mayor de San Marcos awarded him the high distinction of Honorary Professor of Botany and, in 1962, when the Universidad Nacional del Cuzco gave him the same title.

A man of extreme compassion for others and of happy disposition, who could laugh hardest at a joke directed to himself, he personally and financially supported with deep sincerity numerous political and social causes. He had that fortunate propensity of devoting himself wholly to his research during working hours and completely transferring his interests to extra-curricular activities upon leaving his laboratory. An avid field botanist of the local flora, he was a mainstay of the New England Botanical Club for 58 years, serving as its corresponding secretary from 1949 to 1965. He was a keen amateur ornithologist, an accomplished skater, a dedicated photographer and an enthusiastic world traveller.

When, in 1968, he married his lifelong friend, Miss Maria Elizabeth Westergren, a lady with many similar interests and philosophical outlooks, there began a period that visibly brightened both lives and filled his final years with a happy companionship.

He died peacefully at his home in Wellesley, Massachusetts, on November 16, 1970, survived by his wife.

A classicist who read Latin for pleasure, he often quoted the wisdom of the ancients in evaluating modern problems and manners. I shall remember one of these quotations, since, to me, it explains so much of Charles' philosophy. It is Plutarch's: "It is indeed a desirable thing to be well descended, but the glory belongs to our ancestors".

—RICHARD EVANS SCHULTES