

## H. C. WATSON

By R. D. MEIKLE.

“Watsonia,” the title of our new journal, commemorates the name of Hewett Cottrell Watson, one of the most colourful figures in the annals of British botany, a staunch and active supporter of our society through many stages of its chequered history, and perhaps the greatest and most influential authority on the geographic distribution of British plants that this country has yet known.

Watson was born in 1804 at Firbeck, Yorks., received his scientific education at Edinburgh University, and died, unmarried, on 27th July 1881, at Thames Ditton, Surrey, where he had lived and worked for almost half-a-century.

If the bare record of Watson's life, as given above, be somewhat unexciting, the same adjective cannot with justification be attached to the man himself. He was a turbulent figure, a born controversialist, a pungent critic, and a most enthusiastic disturber of the peace—for indeed a profound and enervating peace had descended upon British botany in the 1830's, when Watson published his first works on British plant geography. The great days of discovery were over; Hudson, Withering, Curtis, Smith, and nearly all the eminent followers of the “Smithian-Linnean” tradition had passed away, and British botany stood in need of fresh blood and revitalization. True enough, there were still such able and active workers as Hooker, Graham, Lindley, and Robert Brown (and Watson had learned much from the first two), but they were busy men, too much occupied with academic matters or with exotic botany to have more than scanty leisure for research on the British flora. Babington had not yet published his *Manual*, and the first edition of Bentham's popular *Handbook* did not appear until 1858. British systematic botany was in danger of degenerating into a sort of outdoor (and indoor) game, with pretty pictures, simplified texts, ferns and portfolios, and melodious twitterings from the pens of Mr Edwin Lees and the gifted Miss Twamley—just the right kind of thing for the poetic young man or the refined young lady, with nothing technical or scientific to mar the pleasures of a gentle sport.

It was into the placid atmosphere of “greenery-gallery” refinement and pseudo-rusticity that Watson thrust his disturbing presence. In his earliest published work, *Outlines of the Geographical Distribution of British Plants* (1832), we hear the first mutterings of his discontent: “While the distribution of plants,” he writes, “in most of the mountainous countries of Europe, has engaged the sedulous and successful attention of philosophic naturalists . . . in our own country, this department of Botany has been almost utterly neglected; a few vaguely applied terms, as *alpine*, *hilly*, *mountainous* is all that botanists have yet attempted in the way of relative altitude, and the application of

these has often been calculated rather to mislead than to enlighten." This was but the beginning, for, in 1847, something far more weighty and disturbing appeared with the publication of *Cybele Britannica*, vol. I. Here was something novel indeed. Even the very title was considered uncouth and unpronounceable, and there were neither pictures nor poems, nor anything to please the languid botanical dabbler; nothing but cold hard facts, figures, statistics, numbers and names. Small wonder that the author "never recouped himself one penny of the cost of paper, print, and binding"! Yet this volume, and the three that followed during the succeeding twelve years, contributed more to British botany than all the outpourings of poetic-floristic flummery put together. *Cybele Britannica* stands as the first serious attempt to put British geographic and distributional botany on an exact scientific basis, to replace vague generalizations with concrete facts, and to analyse the character and content of the British flora. How far it succeeded can best be judged by comparing a pre-Watsonian local flora with a similar work of the present day; the former was, more often than not, a bare catalogue of plants and localities, with no effort made to discriminate between "natives" and "aliens," nor to determine the exact distribution, vertical or horizontal, of the plants enumerated. If any such information was included, it was all too often extracted word for word from Hooker's *British Flora* or some other popular work of the period. Of course, there were exceptions, but even the best of these would seem inadequate judged by modern standards, standards which were originally fixed in *Cybele Britannica*. Not that Watson's own work was faultless—the boundaries of his 112 vice-comital divisions were chosen somewhat arbitrarily, records were sometimes accepted from unreliable sources, and his views on the "species question" were dogmatic and occasionally unfair. But such blemishes were almost inevitable in view of the magnitude of the task, and the state of British botany at the time of its inception. The marvel is that the mistakes were not more numerous and more serious. Watson never claimed infallibility, and corrected many early errors in the *Compendium of the Cybele* and its supplements, and in *Topographical Botany*, his last large-scale work. *Cybele Britannica* was not an end in itself, but rather the starting point of investigations which continued long after Watson's death, carried on by our own society, and by innumerable field clubs and natural history organizations, many of them founded during the period of resurgence of field studies which followed the publication of his great work.

Watson had been an active field-botanist in his younger days, and throughout his life remained in close contact with botanists and botanical societies in all parts of the British Isles. Although geographical botany occupied the foremost place in his life, a glance through early numbers of the *Phytologist* and the *Journal of Botany* shows the wide range of his botanical interests. Not only botany, but psychology, politics, phrenology, and Darwinism were subjected to his cautious and searching scrutiny. As regards Darwinism, he anticipated several criti-

cisms subsequently put forward, and, in 1868, wrote: "the reaction against a first scepticism has been great and rapid in favour of the Darwinian doctrines. The danger now is that Mr Darwin will be supposed to have discovered and established much more than he truly has done"—a danger which has not abated with the passing of years.

Watson was, in some respects, a puzzling figure; ebulliently self-confident and dogmatic in his writings, he yet once admitted that "he never re-read in print aught written by himself without the decided conviction that it might have been much better done—better planned, and better worked out." Moreover, despite his outspoken criticism of "species-manufacturers," he could privately confess that the "splitters" understood British plants "far better than Hooker, Bentham and Arnott." His severest strictures were always addressed to those intellectually his equals—persons well able to defend themselves—and were always flavoured with a dash of impish humour, so that, at their worst, they were never wholly unpleasant, and, at best, choice feasts of wit and logic. Nothing short of a full-scale biography can hope to do justice to such a rare personality, but readers who wish to taste some of his humour and learning should consult the prefaces and appendices to *Cybele*, its *Compendium* and supplements—where Babington, Baker and Backhouse are irreverently described as the three "Industrious Bees" of Botany, and poor Baker is dismissed with his fellow rhodologists as a mere "Dog-rose fancier"! But these are asides; Watson will be remembered for his serious contributions to botanical science long after the quips and quarrels are forgotten, and this society sets itself a high standard in adopting the name of one whose creed it was that "intellectual truth should be held paramount over all other considerations."

[A detailed account of Watson's life and works, by J. G. Baker, appears in the *Journal of Botany*, 19 (1881). Additional information will be found in the introduction to Druce's *Comital Flora*, pp. xji-xviii, and a list of his published works in *Bot. Centralbl.*, 7, 254 (1881)].