

Obituaries

WILLIAM MORETON CONDRY (1918–1998)

Bill Condry was widely known and loved as a naturalist through his lectures and broadcasts, his many books and his Country Diary for *The Guardian* which he wrote for 42 years. He was born in 1918 in Birmingham, his parents being Clarionites, pacifists and active members of the Independent Labour Party. His love of the Welsh countryside began on family holidays to Cardigan Bay, and he was first taken up Cadair Idris at the age of six. His university degrees at Birmingham, London and Aberystwyth were variously in French, Latin and History. During the war he worked as a conscientious objector in forestry in Herefordshire. In 1946 he married Penny, herself a good botanist and a brilliant gardener, and they made a succession of homes mostly in north Cardiganshire, moving always closer to the Dyfi estuary which Bill's writings made so much his own and which he did so much to conserve. The same year they went to Pembrokeshire to seek out Ronald Lockley, and began their long involvement with what was then known as the West Wales Field Society and which later became the Dyfed Wildlife Trust.

From 1947 to 1956 Bill was the W.W.F.S. Nature Warden, Mid Wales, and edited their *Field notes*. The 19 numbers of these, from 1950 to 1954, inspired and became incorporated into *Nature in Wales* in 1955, Bill being co-editor with Lockley and others for the first six issues. Although far from being a committee man by nature, he sat on many, most importantly the Nature Conservancy Committee for Wales, and was closely involved in setting up some of the early National Nature Reserves as well as the Bardsey Bird and Field Observatory and, with Captain and Mrs Vaughan, the Kite Committee. He became the first warden of the R.S.P.B. Reserve at Ynys-hir in 1969, and retired in 1982 to devote himself to writing. His first book had been *Thoreau* (1954). The New England philosopher and prophet of self-sufficiency, with his passion for close observation of nature and his belief in the "tonic of wildness", had a great influence on Bill.

He joined the B.S.B.I. in 1963 and was immediately elected on to the Welsh Region Committee which had been set up the previous year, and remained on it until 1971. He had already contributed many records to the *Atlas of the British flora*. His interest in, and considerable knowledge of ecology came about chiefly through his friendships with Hugh Chater, lecturer in Botany at Aberystwyth, and Evan Price Evans, the schoolteacher who had been a friend of Tansley and introduced ecology into the school curriculum. Bill, partly in preparation for his many books, visited every part of Wales. His especial interest became the distribution of the mountain plants of Caernarvonshire and Merioneth, their relationship to the geology, and the history of their discovery by the botanists of the past. It gave him the greatest pleasure to set out with friends on expeditions to refind some Snowdonian rarity where Edward Llwyd or James Backhouse had recorded it. In this age of increasingly desk-bound conservationists, the quantity and quality of information on the detailed history and localities of rare plants possessed by dedicated field naturalists of Bill's calibre has become ever more valuable, and he used his immense store of knowledge to help numerous research workers and recorders. Much of this knowledge fortunately went into his writings, and for the botanist the best are his magnificent New Naturalist books, *The Snowdonia National Park* (Collins, 1966), and *The Natural history of Wales* (Collins, 1981). Among his dozen other books the autobiographical *Pathway to the wild* (Faber, 1975) and *Wildlife my life* (Gomer, 1995) are outstanding. He was a brilliant photographer, especially in black and white, and took many memorable photos of plants. A long friendship with Mary Richards of Dolgellau, co-author with Peter Benoit of *A contribution to a Flora of Merioneth*, and from the age of 66 one of Kew's greatest plant collectors in Africa, led to his last book, *Wildflower safari, the life of Mary Richards* (Gomer, 1998). This was the fulfilment of a promise Bill made to her that he would record her life, and is based largely on her diaries. It is one of the few biographies of a B.S.B.I. member that we have.

The cumulative effect for conservation of Bill's lifelong output of books, talks, broadcasts and articles was immense, and for many of us he was a touchstone in his attitude to the natural world.

A. O. CHATER

ALFRED A. P. SLACK
(1913–1998)

Alfred Slack (Alf to his many friends and acquaintances) died on 6 March 1998 following a severe stroke. His passing deprives Scottish field botany of one of its most active workers. A Londoner, he attended school in the capital and was a graduate of London University. In the 1930s however he moved to Scotland and, having remained there ever since, may justly claim to have been an 'adopted Scot'! During the war years Alf worked in agriculture and forestry in Argyll and afterwards took up teaching as a profession. For many years he was a teacher, and latterly Principal of the Glasgow Tutorial College. No doubt nurtured by his experience in the hill country of Argyll during the war, Alf's great interest in natural history subjects, particularly botanical, led him in 1948 to join the Andersonian Naturalists of Glasgow (now the Glasgow Natural History Society) of which he was a member until his death. He was its President from 1970 to 1973.

In 1952 Alf joined the B.S.B.I. and was soon much involved in field work for *Atlas of the British Flora*, published in 1962. Weekends and holidays were generally spent away from Glasgow, either camping or living in a car-caravan with his wife Mattie and children Alan and Christine, often in places seldom if ever visited by other botanists, although 'classic' localities such as the Clova Mountains and the Braemar area also received attention. A good supply of B.S.B.I. field recording cards was always to hand on these occasions and the Atlas project benefitted accordingly. In the 1960s the tenancy of a holiday cottage in Argyll enabled more ready access to points north, and soon the acquisition of an old cabin cruiser named *Fulmar* made it possible to explore some of the off-shore islands and to visit the Hebridean islands.

In his younger days Alf was a climber of no mean ability, and he never lost his love of the hills and their fascinating arctic-alpine flora. He will perhaps be best remembered for his rediscovery of the Purple Colts-foot (*Homogyne alpina*) in the Clova Mountains in 1951 (one of George Don's 'lost' plants). Alf was very secretive about the location of this rarity and only revealed it to a privileged few, of which I feel very honoured to have been one. I recall the occasion when a small party gathered at Glen Doll Youth Hostel to be taken by Alf to the rock ledge where the *Homogyne alpina* grew. He had decided that Ursula Duncan, the then v.c. Recorder, had better be shown the site, and the others present were myself, Grant Roger and David McClintock. On another occasion Alf and I were in Clova to check on the *Homogyne* when we happened to meet the late Dr Humphrey Milne-Redhead who was camping in the area. The conversation inevitably turned to the subject of the *Homogyne* and it was very obvious that the doctor would dearly love to have directions to the spot; but it was equally obvious that the discoverer had no intention of divulging the information! Another of Alf's notable achievements was his confirmation of the 18th century records of *Dryas octopetala* and *Oxytropis halleri* on the limestone of Beinn Sguilaird in Argyll.

Alf Slack was not a prolific writer on botanical subjects. His published articles include an account of *Pinguicula lusitanica* in the *Glasgow naturalist*, notes on the limestone flora of Beinn Sguilaird in the same journal and, as joint author, notes on the flora of the Kishorn limestone in Wester Ross. He was one of the main organisers of the field work resulting in the publication of *A Map Flora of Mainland Inverness-shire* in 1985. He led many of the meetings in connection with that project and was largely responsible for the text, although this was never adequately acknowledged. His interest in the Rev. John Lightfoot was well known, and in 1986 he was invited to a symposium in Edinburgh to speak on that gentleman's travels in Scotland with Thomas Pennant. Alf possessed a first edition of Lightfoot's *Flora Scotica*.

After teaching in Glasgow and at Keil School in Dumbarton, Alf and the family moved to Campbeltown in Kintyre on his taking up a post there. When he retired they moved to Kentallen, near Ballachullish, in a house with magnificent views across Loch Linnhe to Ardgour and Kingairloch. If any part of Scotland attracted Alf Slack more than another it was the western part of Inverness-shire and that bit of Argyll which is included in v.c. 97. He was Recorder for that vice-county up to the time of his death.

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