

Obituary

STUART MAX WALTERS
(1920–2005)

Max Walters was a leading light in the world of plant taxonomy and the conservation of the countryside, and he was renowned for his co-operation with fellow-workers in continental Europe for over fifty years. He had a natural gift for bringing together people from all walks of life for the common cause. I have a vivid memory of him with a group of people so brought together to perform the first coppicing in Hayley Wood for over forty years: most of them had never before used the motley array of saws, axes, slashers, billhooks, sickles and scythes, but the job was done.

Max was born in Oughtibridge near Sheffield on 23 May 1920; his father Bernard was a furnace foreman in a steel rolling mill who had been apprenticed to his own father, and his mother was a teacher. Soon after 1920 they moved a short distance to Stocksbridge, where Max spent his boyhood. Both towns lay in the smoke-filled valley in what was termed 'the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. The Grammar School that he attended at Penistone, between Sheffield and Huddersfield, was founded in 1392.

He went up to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1938 with an Open Exhibition from the College and a County Major Scholarship from the West Riding. His elder brother Alec, a mathematician, had preceded him to Cambridge at Peterhouse. Max was promoted to an Open Scholarship after one year and gained First Class Honours in Part I of the Natural Sciences Tripos in 1940.

From his parents Max inherited the deep Christian faith and socialist principles that guided his whole life. As a pacifist, he spent the War Years from 1940 to 1945 working in hospitals, first in Sheffield and then near Bristol.

Although he had been fascinated by plants and their variation since childhood, he left school expecting to become a biochemist. However, he was greatly impressed by a trip to the Swiss Alps made between school and university on a travelling scholarship from the West Riding, by a visit to the Cairngorms on a high-powered field trip from the Cambridge Botany School, and especially by the teaching

at Cambridge of Humphrey Gilbert Carter, Director of the University Botanic Garden, and Harry Godwin, who later became Professor of Botany and received a knighthood.

On returning to Cambridge in 1945, Max achieved a First in Part II Botany in 1946. Later that year he commenced research for a PhD on a DSIR grant. In the introduction to his dissertation, submitted and approved in 1950, he noted that he had been introduced to the taxonomic problems of *Eleocharis* which he was studying for his PhD by a Norfolk amateur botanist, Richard Libbey, when they were identifying the Cyperaceae of Norfolk fens. His doctoral work included the relatively new field of experimental taxonomy, which involved cultivating plants in uniform conditions. Much of his experimental work was done at Wicken Fen. He received only light guidance from his supervisor Harry Godwin, who recognised Max's self-motivation.

In 1947 Max spent the summer at Uppsala in Sweden where some of the seminal work in experimental taxonomy was carried out; he had learned Swedish in Cambridge from Brita Mortensen, a granddaughter of the dramatist August Strindberg. Latin, French and German he learned at school and the use of German Floras with Gilbert Carter in practicals in which the class named plants with Garcke's *Flora von Mittel- und Nord-Deutschland*. Later he learned Russian. His linguistic abilities were to serve him well in his co-operation with many continental botanists.

In 1948 he married his childhood sweetheart Lorna Strutt, who was to be his bedrock for a long and happy family life.

In 1949 Max was elected to a three-year Research Fellowship at St John's. Later in the year he was made Curator of the Herbarium at Cambridge, a post which had been vacant since 1931. In the beginning of 1950 I returned to that herbarium from doing my National Service. The whole of the Botany School was being renovated, its museum disbanded and its herbarium moved to the room occupied by the former museum. The old herbarium was a dull and dismal place with brown cupboards, poor lighting and few visitors. The new herbarium

was more spacious, with white cupboards and modern lights. Max was to turn this new herbarium into a hive of activity over the next 20 years as more and more money became available. As well as myself, three young lady technicians worked full-time on the general herbarium and Dorothy Soden part-time on the mosses. Professor E. J. H. Corner was to work on tropical botany and fungi. It was a very happy place to work in.

Max devoted much time to teaching. He gave second year students lectures on experimental taxonomy, variously entitled 'Evolution and reproduction', 'Taxonomy and evolution' and 'Genetics and experimental taxonomy'. He continued Humphrey Gilbert Carter's practice of teaching the third year students the families of flowering plants in a global context, as well as using Garcke's *Flora von Mittel- und Nord-Deutschland* to teach them elementary German. Max also followed Gilbert Carter in taking students, and anyone else who asked to come along, on afternoon cycle rides to get to know about the local flora. He gave tutorials to first year students in Botany up to 1964 and in the Biology of Organisms from 1966; this involved a whole range of disciplines from morphology and anatomy through physiology to ecology.

In the Easter vacation or in the summer Max took students on excursions covering taxonomy and ecology, mostly abroad, to Sweden (1950), Portugal (1951), Scotland (1953), the Austrian Alps (1954), Wales (1955), Ireland (1959), Bavaria (1961), Slovakia (1963), southern France (1965), Slovenia (1967), Majorca (1969 and 1973) and Montenegro (1971).

Max supervised a number of PhD students – Eklas Bari (*Silene*), Christopher Cook (*Ranunculus* subgenus *Batrachium*), Shahina Ghazanfar (*Silene*), Keith Goodway (*Galium*), Geoffrey Halliday (*Arenaria*), Joachim Kadereit (*Senecio*), Alan Leslie (*Ranunculus auricomus* agg.), Neville Marchant (*Veronica*), Pierre Morisset (*Ononis*), David Ockendon (*Linum*), Honor Prentice (*Silene*), Gordon Smith (*Potentilla*) and Fenella Wrigley (*Silene*). *Alchemilla* was probably his favourite genus, followed by *Aphanes*, *Montia*, *Silene*, *Betula* and *Viola*.

In April 1954, the B.S.B.I. appointed Max as part-time Director of a scheme to map the distribution of British and Irish plants; Frank Perring became the 'Senior Worker' in the scheme the following October. The *Atlas of the British Flora* was published in 1962. From the records accumulated in Cambridgeshire for the *Atlas*, with those in the Cambridge Natural

History Society's card index, *A Flora of Cambridgeshire* by Max, Franklyn, Harold Whitehouse and myself was published in 1964.

During the International Botanical Congress in July 1954, in a brasserie on the banks of the Seine, an informal meeting of Tom Tutin, Roy Clapham, John Gilmour, Alan Burges, David Valentine and Vernon Heywood (all Cambridge students) took a decision that a *Flora of Europe* could and should be written. In January 1955 David Webb was added to the group and in March 1956 Max was invited to join the committee. The Linnean Society of London acted as sponsors and Cambridge University Press offered to publish it. Volume 1 was published in 1964, Volume 2 in 1968, Volume 3 in 1972, Volume 4 in 1976 and Volume 5 in 1980. As well as editing 23 of the families including the Caryophyllaceae and half of the Compositae Max wrote 19 genera, including *Alchemilla* with B. Pawloski and *Senecio* with Arthur Chater. *Flora Europaea* was one of the most important taxonomic works published in that century; it brought to the Cambridge Herbarium visiting botanists from all over the world and they were regularly entertained by Max and his family. The final conference was held at King's College, Cambridge, between 31 August and 4 September 1977 and brought a total of 131 visitors from 30 countries. Max had become a Fellow of King's in 1964 and bore the brunt of the organisation, together with Gigi Crompton. It was probably the last time that great group of Cambridge botanical taxonomists who originated as Gilbert Carter students in the 1930s, which included the editors of *Flora Europaea*, and those who were Max's students between 1950 and 1970 came together in one place.

As well as the *Atlas*, *Flora Europaea* and *A Flora of Cambridgeshire* Max's curatorship days brought several other major publications. Two New Naturalist books became bibles for many field botanists – *Wild Flowers* with John Gilmour, then Director of the Botanic Garden, and *Mountain Flowers* with John Raven. This reminds me of Max's height: he was well over six feet and had very long legs, which were similar to those of John Raven, both of whom I had to run to keep up with when going down a mountain. Perhaps the most important of his writings, however, was *Plant Variation and Evolution*, written with David Briggs, which has held its own at universities and institutes for over 30 years. With B. Pawlowski he wrote the 50-species account of *Alchemilla* for the *Flora of Turkey*.

Max also had an active role in the Cambridge Natural History Society. He joined in 1938 and was elected Junior Secretary in 1939 and Senior Secretary in 1940. He was Botanical Curator from 1947 to 1961, Botanical Recorder from 1961 to 1974, President from 1973 to 1975 and Vice-President from 1975 to 1994. He retired from Council only recently, after being continuously on it for 53 years. He exhibited at the annual conversazione for many years.

Max gave a huge amount of his time to conservation, especially the Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely Naturalists' Trust. He was one of a small band of enthusiasts who established first CAMBIENT and then *Nature in Cambridgeshire*, which was sponsored equally at the start by the Natural History Society and the Naturalists' Trust. From the inauguration of CAMBIENT in 1956 until 1965 he was Secretary for Cambridgeshire, while Tony Vine was Secretary for the Isle of Ely. He was Vice-President from 1965 to 1975 and President from 1975 to 1986. In 1962 CAMBIENT bought its first major reserve, Hayley Wood, which is now world-famous. With Robert Payne, the Honorary Secretary, Max bore the brunt of organising the appeal for the £5000 needed to buy it. In 1975 it gave him great pleasure to write the introduction to Oliver Rackham's pioneering book *Hayley Wood: Its History and Ecology*.

Max must be credited also with a significant role in getting the Society for the Protection of Nature Reserves, now the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, reinvigorated in the late 1950s, although the chief role was played by Ted Smith of Lincolnshire. When a buffet supper was held on 15 November 1996 to mark the fortieth anniversary of CAMBIENT, Ted Smith made a speech in which he paid special tribute to Max's part in arranging the meeting on 19–20 June 1957 which led to the 'Cambridge Declaration' on the need for an 'Association of Trusts'.

Max had a pivotal role in the running of *Nature in Cambridgeshire*. There was a very slender issue in 1985 after none at all in 1984. That it continued was very much due to his determination. Knowing of the late William Palmer's enthusiasm for the journal, he successfully argued for the use of half the money raised in his memory to become a 'float' to relaunch it. He persuaded Philip Oswald to continue as Editor and invited him and others to form an independent Editorial Board, which he himself chaired. Over the



Max Walters in 1965.

years he contributed 15 standard articles, seven book reviews, five obituaries, five notes or reports and two 'state of the nation' reports on *Nature in Cambridgeshire*.

Of all the nature reserves he had an interest in, Wicken Fen, belonging to the National Trust, held a special place in his heart. He first visited it in 1939, by bicycle and boat with Humphrey Gilbert Carter, and he did much work there in his PhD days. He was a member of the National Trust's local Committee from 1949 to 1995, the Botanical Secretary from 1949 to 1976 and 1986 to 1990 and Chairman from 1979 to 1985, and he continued to advise until 2004.

When Upper Teesdale came under threat from being flooded for a reservoir, with Harry Godwin he stoutly defended it as a unique site of relict communities of plants and gave evidence to Parliament in an attempt to save it. When they lost their appeal he sent two trips from the Cambridge Herbarium to collect a series of the plants which grew there and a set of the Teesdale *Alchemilla* species.

When Max became the Director of the Botanic Garden in 1973, its future seemed rather uncertain. Undergraduates rarely went there and specimens sent to the Botany School for practicals had greatly declined. Max encouraged people of all kinds and ages to visit the Garden and emphasised its role in education. He insisted on first-rate labelling of

all the species. He relaunched the Friends of the Botanic Garden organisation, which had lapsed after its foundation in the 1930s. He encouraged Roland Randall to write the first modern educational leaflets for the Garden, those on native trees and shrubs being illustrated by Rosemary Nicholls.

At the time when Max moved to the Garden, Gigi Crompton, whom he first met over conservation of an orchid meadow at Thriplow, had been given a contract by the Nature Conservancy Council to survey rare species in eastern England. He provided her with a base in the Garden and developed the project by gaining extra funds from the N.C.C. to employ a succession of conservation gardeners to study the responses of these rare species in cultivation. Later Gigi was to help him organise many Cambridge events and excursions. Max supervised the construction of a new display bed of rare plants of the region and provided a home for conservation of rare plants of Majorca and St Helena. He was among the first Directors of the great gardens to concern themselves with conservation.

When visiting the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, in the summer of 1976, Max talked to James Cullen and found that they both had the same idea about producing a flora of garden plants. So was born the *European Garden Flora* in six volumes, edited by James, Max and 19 others. Max wrote the accounts of 25 genera. Volume 1 was published in 1986, Volume 2 in 1984, Volume 3 in 1989, Volume 4 in 1995, Volume 5 in 1997 and Volume 6 in 2000.

Max also developed an interest in the history of botany, which he tied up with his philosophy of plant classification. Like John Gilmour, he believed that dividing plants into genera was mostly artificial and mainly a matter of convenience, and it was very difficult to persuade him to alter concepts and long-established names. While at the Botanic Garden he wrote *The Shaping of Cambridge Botany* in 1981, and in 2001 in his retirement, he wrote with Anne Stow, formerly Head of the Scientific Periodicals Library, *Darwin's Mentor: John Stevens Henslow 1796–1861*. For the centenary of the official opening of the new building of the Botany School in 2004, Peter Grubb, Anne Stow and he produced *100 Years of Plant Sciences in Cambridge 1904–2004*. From 1982 until his death he was an active Editor of the *New Naturalist* series, for which he wrote *Wild and Garden Plants* in 1993. In 1989 he and Frank Perring produced a popular

identification book, *The Macmillan Field Guide to British Wildflowers*, with specially commissioned photographs by Andrew Gagg, which was reprinted in 1994. His last published book, with John and Jill White, *Trees: a Field Guide*, appeared in 2005. His final publication has just appeared and is a substantial essay to accompany the facsimile edition of John Ray's *The Wisdom of God* to mark the tercentenary of that author's death.

Max was a keen supporter of my own and Gina Murrell's *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, christened 'FOGBI' by Frank Perring. He was always much interested in variation and was quick to realise the significance of early-flowering variants introduced to this country: hence his articles in the *Grantchester Parish Magazine* on Snowdrops and on *Sorbus*. He also fully understood the taxonomy of apomicts. He wrote the forewords to Volumes 4 and 5 of FOGBI. My last long talk with him was about how we hoped almost all his work and that of his students on the British flora since 1950 would come together in the five volumes. His last active part in it was to sit in the Cambridge Botanic Garden on a beautiful June morning and select typical specimens from two large beds for nearly all the British *Alchemilla* species for me to describe.

In his last years Max visited the Botanic Garden once a week, and on another day, with his daughter Stella, the Herbarium, where he spent time clearing up all the odds and ends accumulated over the years. He gave loyal support to the Cambridge U3A Botany Group for many years: from 1990 to 2002 he usually gave the opening lecture or took the members for a spring walk along the Backs.

Throughout his life Max was so often the calming influence between two antagonistic bodies, particularly on the numerous committees on which he served. There never seemed to be a lost cause: he would find some way of keeping it going. He never seemed to be in a hurry and his very calmness always gave him a good start in any argument. Considering that many meetings often took place in the evening, sometimes very late, and the number that he attended, it was a wonder he kept going, but I only once saw him completely exhausted. What helped was that, like his predecessor at the Botanic Garden, Humphrey Gilbert Carter, whenever possible he took a short siesta after lunch.

On the summer excursions Sunday was always a day off for everybody to do as they pleased. Max always enjoyed a good laugh.

I remember standing with him at a village fair on the Slovakian–Romanian border watching our students go round and round on the merry-go-round singing ‘On top of old Smokey’, and on another occasion we watched a student rush all over a marsh on a very hot day trying to flush a ventriloquial Corncrake so that she could tick it on her list. He could also let annoyance turn into laughter. Once, when I had kept the busload of students waiting for half an hour in Yugoslavia, he greeted me with ‘Where on earth have you been?’ I replied ‘Watching the antics of a pair of Sombre Tits’, and the bus dissolved into laughter. When the laughter died down, he said ‘There’s no answer to that; we’d better move on.’ He was a great fan of the Goons and of Monty Python, and he once laughed so much at Monty Python’s antics that he pulled an intercostal muscle and had to have treatment.

As a final note of appreciation of Max’s great kindness and understanding I have to add a vote of personal thanks. He did everything it was possible to do to help me in a lifelong study of the British flora and in a way which was the embodiment of a great University at a time before it became obsessed with money. From an amazing 2000-mile trip round Ireland in 1952 with Tom Tutin, Tige Böcher, David Webb, Donald Pigott and Roy Clapham, through all the student excursions, both at home and aboard, he nearly always took me with him.

Max joined the B.S.B.I. in 1944, served on the Council from 1957 to 1962 and 1966 to 1969, was Vice-President from 1962 to 1966 and President from 1973 to 1975, served on the Conservation Committee from 1958 to 1969, the Maps Committee from 1959 to 1965, the Publications Committee from 1958 to 1969, the Records Committee from 1966 to 1969 and the Wild Plant Protection Working Party from 1965 to 1969, and was vice-county recorder for Cambridgeshire from 1949 to 1961. He was referee for *Montia* from 1951 to 1986, for *Potentilla* from 1973 to 1979, for *Aphanes* from 1950 to 2005, for *Eleocharis* from 1949 to 2005, for *Betula* from 1983 to 1995, for

Alchemilla from 1949 to 2005 and for *Silene* from 1962 to 2005. He was awarded his ScD at Cambridge in 1980, the Royal Horticultural Society’s Victoria Medal of Honour in 1984 and the Linnean Medal of Botany in 1995. He became an Honorary Fellow of the Linnean Society and an Honorary Member of the B.S.B.I. At King’s College he served on the Garden Committee. He sat on the R.H.S. Scientific Committee from 1976 to 1994.

Max was at various times active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Christian Aid. He had been to Sarajevo for a three-month visit on a British Council grant, so, after the civil war, he worked hard with his son Martin for the restoration of the Botanic Garden and Museum there. A fountain in that Botanic Garden records his enthusiasm and generosity.

During Max’s curatorship years the Walters family lived in a flat at 1 Brookside overlooking the Botanic Garden. Later he was the last Director to live in Cory Lodge in the Garden. In his retirement he lived at Grantchester, where he was Churchwarden from 1995 to 2001 and wrote 207 articles for the *Grantchester Parish Magazine*, some of which were botanical; a full set of this magazine from March 1986 is available in the Cambridgeshire Collection in Cambridge City Library. I believe that, unless one has read these articles, one does not understand the complete man.

Max died on 11 December 2005, aged 85. A thanksgiving service for his life was held at 2.30 p.m. on Saturday, 3 June 2006, in Grantchester Parish Church. His wife Lorna survives him together with their three children, Philip and the twins Martin and Stella. He will be much missed by his many friends.

I am greatly indebted to Peter Grubb for much of the information and dates concerned with the University of Cambridge, to Mary Briggs, Gwynn Ellis and David Pearman for information about the B.S.B.I., and to Philip Oswald and Arthur Chater for general help.

PETER SELL

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