

Sir John Burnett

John Burnett was a person of unusually broad experience and interests. These included: active service in the Second World War, important fundamental research into fungi and their genetics, professorships in four different universities, a Vice-Chancellorship in a fifth, and a key national role in an important aspect of the conservation of biodiversity.

He was born on January 21 1922, a 'son of the manse' since his father was the Reverend T Harrison Burnett, the incumbent of Paisley Abbey. He was educated at Kingswood School, Bath, and then went up to Oxford in 1940 to study Botany at Merton College. He interrupted his student career in 1942 by volunteering for the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, achieving the rank of Lieutenant. He served in destroyers protecting arctic convoys and in the Mediterranean during the siege of Malta, and was mentioned in despatches. He was also briefly holed up in a cave with Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia during the secret partisan war of the liberation of that country.

He was demobilised in 1946, returning to Oxford where he graduated with First Class Honours in Botany in 1947. He was awarded the Christopher Welch Research Scholarship which enabled him to begin studying for his D.Phil. A year later he also took on teaching duties as a lecturer at Lincoln College, and then gained further distinction in 1949 when he became a Fellow by Examination at Magdalen College. At the same time he was appointed to a University Lectureship at the Botany Department in Oxford. Unsurprisingly, his D.Phil. was not completed until 1953!

It was as a botany student in Oxford in 1949 that I first met John. He gave us lucid, inspirational lectures on genetics. He also taught field classes where, for someone researching fungi, he revealed a remarkably broad and detailed knowledge of flowering plant ecology; it was only years later that I realised the significance of this. He was my tutor for a term, where I experienced at first hand that his wicked sense of humour overlaid real kindness. I still have an undergraduate essay marked by him: an initial grade of 'β+' crossed out and replaced with 'α- - -' and the comment "a dull answer to an even duller question!"

His promising career at Oxford was abruptly changed in the early 1950s by the appointment of a famous cytologist/geneticist as the new head of the Botany Department. This person proved so difficult and unpopular that one third of the staff soon moved to other universities or departments. John left a lectureship and prestigious college fellowship at Oxford for a lectureship at Liverpool University in 1954. A year later (and only two years after gaining his D.Phil), he was appointed Professor of Botany at St. Andrews at the surprisingly young age of 33. It was here that his talents for academic leadership began to emerge: only three years after his appointment, he became Dean of the Faculty of Science. In 1961 he moved to a Professorship of Botany at the larger University of Newcastle, becoming the Dean of Science in 1963 and the Public Orator in 1966. After eight years at Newcastle, he was appointed to the Regius Chair of Botany at Glasgow University. Thus, within 16 years he had held academic positions of increasing prominence in five different British universities.

The circle was complete in 1970 when he returned to Oxford - not to Botany, but to the Department of Agriculture where his title was 'Sibthorpean Professor of Rural Economy' (and in a building with the name 'Scholae Rusticae Oeconomicae' engraved over its entrance). I was a member of staff at the time and witnessed at first hand his modernising leadership of an exceptionally happy and close-knit department. He also played a vital role in the two major central university committees at Oxford during a period of significant change in that institution.

In 1980, he reached the highest point of his academic career, becoming Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh. His wide experience and leadership skills proved of great benefit to the university at a difficult time when the Higher Education system was suffering under the Thatcher regime. Fittingly, he supervised the 400th anniversary of the University during his term of office, and led the unique 'Edinburgh Conversations' which brought together Russian and UK scientists during the Cold War.

Despite the wide variety of administrative distractions, he remained very active academically. Over the space of 40 years he wrote, or edited and contributed to, no fewer than 10 books. The titles of some of them reveal the breadth of his interests, e.g. *The Vegetation of Scotland* (1964), *Fundamentals of Mycology* (1968 - 3rd edition 1994!), *Mycogenetics* (1975), *The Maintenance of*

the Biosphere (1989), *Biological Recording in the UK: present practice and future developments* (1996), and *Fungal populations and species* (2003).

Throughout his career he had a deep interest in conservation. Already in his Editor's preface and opening chapter of *The Vegetation of Scotland* he recognised that more needed to be done to collect, collate and analyse new information about biodiversity. He had been a member of both the Scottish and English committees of the Nature Conservancy at various times, but it was after his retirement from Edinburgh University in 1987 that this aspect of his activities began to burgeon. He was a member of the Nature Conservancy Council (1987 -1989) serving as Deputy Chairman and Acting Chairman during an unhappy period when it was being broken up into Country Agencies. He was bitterly opposed to this, and played a major role in ensuring that despite the break-up, a UK-wide body was established - the Joint Nature Conservation Committee - to advise the newly established Country Agencies. It was probably because of this that Margaret Thatcher greeted him at a social occasion with "Ah, Burnett, my favourite dissident scientist".

His other projects at this time included serving as the Executive Secretary of the World Council for the Biosphere (1987-93) and Chairman of the International Organisation for Plant Information (1991- 6). But certainly the most significant was his becoming Chairman, and actively leading the work, of the newly formed Co-ordinating Commission for Biological Recording (1989 - 2003). As a result of the UK response to the Rio Convention on Biodiversity (1992), this led to the creation of the National Biodiversity Network, of which John was chair from 2000 to 2005. It was his perspicacious and skilful leadership which helped it to become a world leader in its field, and today it holds data on over 27 million life forms.

John was essentially a very private person, but outwardly kind, humorous, friendly, calm and even-tempered, clear-thinking and un pompous. He never boasted of his achievements. In 1945 he married Margaret, the eldest daughter of the Reverend Dr E. W. Bishop, and they had two sons who subsequently pursued successful careers. Their 62 year marriage was a great comfort to them both.

David Smith

John Harrison Burnett Kt., M.A., D.Phil (Oxon), Commendatore OM (Italy), Hon. LI.D. (Glasgow, Dundee, Strathclyde), Dr. Honoris Causa (Edinburgh), Hon. D.Sc. (Buckingham, Pennsylvania USA), Hon. FRCSE, F.I.Biol., Hon. Fellow (Green and Merton Colleges, Oxford), Hon. Research Professor Open University. Born 21 January 1922, elected FRSE 4 March 1957, died 22 July 2007.