

CHARLES GEDDES COULL CHESTERS  
OBE, BSc(Glas), MSc, PhD(Birm), FLS, FInstBiol

Charles Chesters, a mycologist of international acclaim and Emeritus Professor of Botany in the University of Nottingham died at Quenington near Cirencester on 13th February 1993. He was elected to the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1953.

Charles was born in Glasgow on March 9th 1904, the son of Charles and Margaret Geddes Chesters. He went to the University of Glasgow from Hyndland School in 1922 and graduated with a First in Botany in 1926. His early interest in teaching which was to continue well into his retirement years was evident from his appointment to a Student Demonstratorship whilst still an undergraduate, and his subsequent appointment in 1927 to an Assistant Lectureship in Botany at the University of Birmingham whilst working part-time for his higher degrees. His early research interests were in aquatic and salt marsh vegetation; his BSc thesis was on the water warrior, *Stratiotes aloides* and his first publication in the *Journal of Ecology* was on the peat deposits of Moine Mhor.

A key turning point in his research career was a decision in 1931 to specialise in mycology and to develop a Research School in Phycomycetes, fungi responsible for soil borne diseases of horticultural plants, and in Pyrenomycetes, wood and bark inhabiting fungi. It was always his endeavour to present fungi, and their plant hosts, as living organisms and this was reflected in his excellence as a field mycologist and his use of photography to research fungi in the natural habitats. At Birmingham, Charles played an active role in the Department of Botany working closely with Professor Walter Stiles, FRS, the Head of the Department, to foster the interests of his Department, and of the University through his Chairmanship of the Pure Science Committee and the Delegacy for Colleges of Education, and as a non-professional Member of Senate. He became Senior Lecturer, and obtained his PhD, in 1937 for a mycological investigation. For several years he was also Lecturer in charge of Biology at Leamington Technical Institute and at the Birmingham and Midland Institute presenting popular lectures in Botany and organising refresher courses for teachers. This time also coincided with bombing attacks on Birmingham and he played an active role as Joint Chief Air Raid Warden for the University and as a part-time Constable, being awarded commendations for Air Raid Incidents and the Police Long Service Medal. He contributed significantly to the War Effort by surveying the use of charcoal from Alder Buckthorn in anti-aircraft shells. He was promoted to a Readership in Mycology in 1942.

When Professor T A Bennett-Clarke, FRS, vacated the Chair of Botany at University College Nottingham in 1944 to become Professor of Botany at Kings College, University of London, Charles Chesters was appointed Professor of Botany at Nottingham and Head of the Department of Botany, a position that he held with distinction for twenty-five years until his retirement in 1969. At Nottingham he was appointed to head a Department of two lecturers, at a time when University College Nottingham was still awarding first and higher degrees of the University of London. In the University College he was a particularly valuable Head of Department at a time when it was passing through a key stage in its development to become a University. Charles enjoyed the respect of his colleagues for his high ideals and undoubted scholarship. He quickly established himself in the University College hierarchy becoming Dean of the Faculty of Pure Science in 1945, serving for four years during which time he drafted the Regulations for the new University of Nottingham degrees to be offered by his Faculty when the Charter of the new University of Nottingham was being prepared. He played a leading role in petitioning for the Charter which was granted in 1948. He steadily built up and extended the reputation of his Department. His own research on seaweed from the Scottish Islands and the West Coast of Ireland, his discovery that seaweed could be decomposed enzymatically by fungi and his studies on antibiotics from seaweed helped significantly in this respect.

His ongoing interest and leadership in teaching programmes led to the establishment of a graduate school of Mycology and a new taught MSc course in Mycology in 1946, the first in the University of Nottingham, which continued until 1968 shortly before his retirement. This MSc course attracted numerous students and presently throughout the UK and overseas are to be found career Mycologists who received their first training at Nottingham. Charles sought to promote the research interests of younger staff appointed to the Department of Botany; he did not, however, attempt to impose his own research interests. His view was that members of his Department should be encouraged to follow their own particular research inclinations. This policy undoubtedly led to the appointment of staff of a calibre later to achieve careers of distinction elsewhere, including Herbert E Street, Paul E Weatherly, FRS, and William D P Stewart FRS.

In the present days of desire to explain science better to the general public, it is noteworthy that Charles Chesters was active in this respect in the British Association for the Advancement of Science for more than forty years, including being Recorder of Section K (Botany) and its President in 1964. He visited numerous countries overseas in this respect and in connection with his Mycology research. His contacts abroad helped greatly in finding research positions for postgraduate students. He was also a Founder Fellow of the Institute of Biology and played a leading role in the development of its Education Programme as Chairman of the Committees for the Certificate in Applied Biology. His services to Education were recognised by his award of an OBE in 1977.

In 1928 he married Margarita Mercedes Cathie Maclean; and throughout his years both at the University of Birmingham, at the University of Nottingham and in his retirement he had the devoted support of Cathie. His son Charles, a graduate in Engineering from the University of Bristol, was employed locally at Rolls Royce Derby, and his daughter Kathleen a graduate of the University of Nottingham working at the Natural History Museum, London lived nearby in Quenington, to where Charles and Cathie retired in 1969. Throughout these 24 years he continued to be active in teaching to adult education groups and research organisations, and gave the Holden Botany Lecture in his former department in 1982.

Although sometimes quick tempered, Charles Chesters was a man of great personal charm and kindness. I first met him when he came to the University of Bristol for the Annual Meeting in 1955; he visiting the laboratory where I was investigating nitrogen metabolism in barley seedlings grown in the water culture — using his 'mycological eye' he clearly pointed out to me that they were infected with barley rust! I experienced his kindness at first hand when I was appointed to a lectureship at Nottingham in plant physiology in 1959 to replace P E Weatherly who was at that time moving to the Regius Chair of Botany at the University of Aberdeen. The general affection felt for him, and the appreciation of his leadership of the Department of Botany for a quarter of a century, was witnessed by a gathering of former colleagues and students in May 1993 at a commemorative ceremony. His bust was unveiled, together with that of the late Professor E J W Barrington, FRS, his fellow Head of Department and Professor of Zoology, and placed flanking the main staircase of the Biology Building.

I am happy to acknowledge the help I have received in preparing this notice from Mrs Cathie Chesters.

EDWARD C COCKING  
(Professor of Botany in the Department of Life Science at the University of Nottingham)

