

Mary Jessie McDonald Noble

Mary Noble passed away peacefully on 20 July 2002 at the Drummond Grange Nursing Home, Lasswade, in an area of Scotland with which she was intimately linked. Her parents were both from Leith, where her father had a chemist and druggist shop at Gladstone Place for over fifty years. Mary was born on 23 February 1911 and it was her father, himself a student in Glasgow of the eminent botanist Professor F O Bower, who introduced Mary to botany. Mary attended Mary Erskine School, before going to Edinburgh University where she gained a B.Sc. with Honours in Botany.

In 1935 she received a Ph.D. under the tutelage of mycologist and plant pathologist Dr Malcolm Wilson, the family of whom she kept in touch with until her death. Her doctorate studies covered mycological aspects of seed pathology, which was to become one of her abiding interests, and her thesis gained her the Gunning Victoria Jubilee Prize of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

After leaving university she joined the Plant Pathology service of the then Board of Agriculture, which was based at the Royal Botanic Garden, Inverleith Row, Edinburgh. She retired in 1971 as a Principal Scientific Officer, in charge of Seed Pathology and Mycology at what had become the Agricultural Scientific Services of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland, now based at East Craigs, Corstorphine, affectionately called the 'Seed Testing Station'.

In 1968 she became a Companion of the Imperial Service Order in recognition of her scientific work for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Mary's main activities in her working career were concerned with plant pathology especially aspects of seed pathology. Her abilities and knowledge within her chosen speciality were recognised by her election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1958, and by her service as a Councillor of both the Association of Applied Biologists and the British Mycological Society (BMS). She was a Vice-President of the latter in 1969 and the Editor of the society's Bulletin (which is now *The Mycologist*) from 1972-78. She was a member of the International Seed Testing Association's (ISTA) Plant Pathology Committee from 1950-1971, and in 1958 produced, with Drs Paul Neergaard and Jo deTempe, the authoritative *Annotated List of Seed-borne Diseases*, a 4th edition of which was published by ISTA in 1990.

Her long involvement with ISTA continued after her 'retirement' and in 1982 she was elected President of the First International Symposium of Seed Pathology held in Denmark, a country with which she had fond connections through her collaboration with Paul Neergaard, Founder and Director of the Danish Government Institute of Seed Pathology for Developing Countries. That organisation provided a springboard for Mary's travels all over the world, where she was a great ambassador for seed pathology, lecturing and running workshops in India, the Philippines, Australia, Argentina, Costa Rica and Israel, an activity which continued after her retirement.

Apart from Mary's ISTA publications, including the development of the ISTA Handbook of Seed Health Testing, her scientific publications included several popular accounts of plant diseases. Others, often with collaborators, covered such wide ranging topics as blind seed disease of ryegrass, stem eelworm of strawberry, various cereal diseases, blackleg, verticillium wilt and coiled shoot of potatoes, farmer's lung, and wart disease of potatoes, all of which were of great importance to Scottish agriculture at the time she worked on them. During WWII she spent time surveying flax fields in the West of Scotland to check the health of crops; disease in the flax could have affected linen production, linen being used for covering aircraft wings.

After her retirement Mary's energies were devoted to a much broader spectrum of interests, albeit with mycological connections and started off with a world tour visiting plant pathology institutes and former collaborators. In planning for retirement, she made the move a few years before to be opposite the 19th hole of Broomieknowe golf course, where she had played for many years, and where there is a hole named after her. Eventually her failing knees prevented her playing golf, but the Beatrix Potter story took over.

In 1975 the Botanical Society of Edinburgh (now Scotland) celebrated the centenary of the incorporated Cryptogamic Society of Scotland. It was for these celebrations that Mary researched the life of Charles McIntosh, a well-known and at the time an important Perthshire naturalist who, although employed as a postman working out of Dunkeld, contributed considerably to our understanding of Scottish cryptogams. She brought McIntosh's great contribution to a much wider audience, and in so doing stumbled across a strong connection with Beatrix Potter. This single event changed the face of 'Potterism', not only in Britain but worldwide, and focussed Mary's energies. She reinstated Beatrix Potter in the public domain as a mycologist as well as a popular but at that time rather out of fashion writer of children's books. She demonstrated that Potter was an accurate observer of nature and landscape, a competent illustrator and a very able scientific thinker. Mary was in great demand as a speaker and writer on Beatrix Potter's mycology, and co-authored *A Victorian Naturalist – Beatrix Potter's Drawings from the Armitage Collection* and became Vice-President of the

Beatrix Potter Society. She uncovered many outstanding details of information about this amazing lady – it is a shame Mary and she never met!

It does not, however, stop there. During all this time she was active in the Scottish Rock Garden Club, where she developed a passion for heathers and annually grew from seed the endemic Scottish *Primula scotica*; the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society; and the National Trust for Scotland.

She played an important role in the establishment of the Suntrap, at Gogarbank, and visited regularly to help staff and deal with enquiries on plant disease and disorders. Her ability to harass and pressurise in a firm but friendly way to right what she felt had been neglected, as exemplified in dealings in connection with Potter and SNT, reaped its reward. No better example than nearer home, where an old cemetery (another of her interests!) of great historic significance had been allowed to fall into ruin. Almost single handedly the importance of the site and those buried there was demonstrated and thoroughly documented, which saw before her death a rekindling of interest in the burial ground, which goes back to the 13th century. One connection with the site was the Drummond family, some of whom emigrated to Australia – and yes, some were botanists, one even a mycologist! The circle is closed.

The scientific and local history communities have been therefore saddened by the death of Mary Noble; indeed the richness of society as a whole has been reduced by a measurable degree. Mary had a vast breadth of information and knowledge, of which only a part was committed to paper. The rest has sadly been lost with her death, especially that relating to interests which she took up with her typical enthusiasm in later years.

Mary outlived a single brother John (Eoin) by a few months, and was aunt to Sandra, Gillian, Fiona and Alastair. She will be sadly missed by family and the many, many friends she made in all her walks of life in many parts of the world.

Roy Watling

Mary Jessie McDonald Noble ISO, BSc, PhD, FIBiol: born 23 February 1911; elected FRSE 3 March 1958; died 20 July 2002.