

NOTES FROM THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN EDINBURGH

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HAROLD ROY FLETCHER 1907–1978

Regius Keeper 1956–1970

Her Majesty's Botanist in Scotland 1967–1978

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When Harold Roy Fletcher first came to Edinburgh in 1934 he was already a trained botanist, teacher and taxonomist. A native of Derbyshire, born in Glossop in 1907 and educated at Glossop Grammar School, he had studied under Professors Weiss and Lang at Manchester and then taught in the Department of Botany in the University of Aberdeen under Professor Craib. Encouraged by Craib at Aberdeen he had taken up research in plant taxonomy (on the flora of Siam) which was to lead his path thereafter. The Garden was indeed fortunate when Sir William Wright Smith brought him to Edinburgh as Assistant in the Museum (in those days the Garden had a Regius Keeper, an Assistant Keeper and four qualified scientific staff—the Assistants in the Herbarium, Museum, Library and Laboratory). While he carried out his regular duties he was the main driving force in the revision of the genus *Primula*—published jointly with Wright-Smith over the years 1941–50. And during those years he found time to encourage sport (particularly tennis and football), develop his artistic interest especially in music and painting (John Maxwell and William Gillies were his friends) and also to meet his future wife Elizabeth (Betty) Sloane, an assistant in the library.

His interest in the general progress of botany in Scotland found expression in his secretaryship of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh from 1942 to 1951 and his presidency from 1957 to 1959. On the outbreak of the Second World War he started a most remarkable period. Many colleagues were away and he carried the science of the Garden almost single-handed. But in addition he carried much university teaching for the ageing Professor, in the evenings taught horticultural students and workers' education classes and still found time for taxonomic research. His taxonomic teaching at that time was remarkable for its breadth of outlook, and the development of several productive schools of taxonomy find their ultimate source in his enthusiasm.

He had had a taste of horticulture in Aberdeen and in Edinburgh but took the chance to widen this in the early 1950s when he left Edinburgh to become Director of the Royal Horticultural Society's Garden at Wisley. As

with all his work, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the world of horticulture—but never uncritically for if he disagreed, he said so—and not everyone liked his unvarnished truths. And in the south he formed strong links and wide personal esteem which he later exploited to the good of the Edinburgh Garden.

When Wright-Smith invited him back to Edinburgh as his Assistant Keeper on J. M. Cowan's retiral in 1955 he accepted. Although the Keepership and Professorship must have appeared possible goals in the near future, the Edinburgh Garden was run down and its development undoubtedly attracted him as a challenge. Wright-Smith died in 1956 and Fletcher succeeded to the Keepership but bore some influence in suggesting that the Regius Chair of Botany be separated from the Regius Keepership—"There's more than enough work for two men". Then began a long hard ten years to rejuvenate the Garden and botanical activity in Edinburgh also. He was ably helped by two outstanding men of great experience: B. L. Burt in the Herbarium and E. E. Kemp in the Garden. The first success was the botanical "annus mirabilis" in Edinburgh in 1964—the Garden's new herbarium and library were opened by Her Majesty the Queen and then the International Botanical Congress brought three thousand botanists to Edinburgh in August. These events placed Edinburgh firmly on the world stage and but for Dr Fletcher's advocacy and enthusiasm one doubts if either would have happened.

Having bullied government into providing an adequate herbarium building he set other plans afoot—the new glasshouses to be completed in 1967, the exhibition hall in 1970, and the acceptance of the enchanting Logan Garden from the Hambro trustees in 1969. He was no less interested in encouraging the development of Inverleith House as a Gallery of Modern Art under the direction of the National Gallery of Scotland. At the Younger Botanic Garden, Benmore, new developments based on his recent interest in *Rhododendron* took shape.

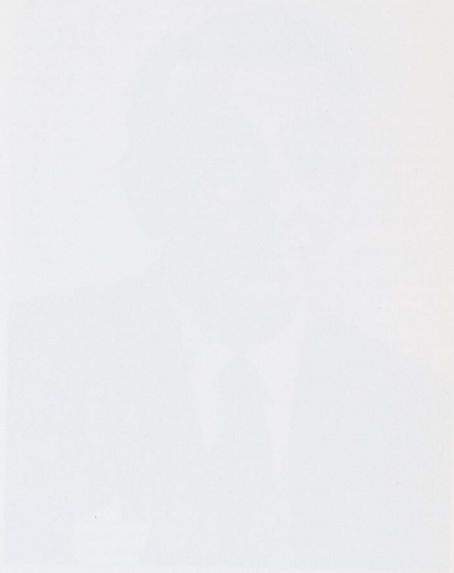
While all this more than occupied his official hours he found time to write *The Story of the Royal Horticultural Society 1804–1968* (1969) and *The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh 1670–1970* (1970), the latter with W. H. Brown.

He saw in the tercentenary of the Garden in 1970 another chance to increase its standing, fully justified by the celebrations he organised. His distinguished work in the academic world in Scotland had been recognized by the award of honorary degrees by the Universities of St Andrews and Edinburgh and an honorary professorship from Edinburgh. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1943 and served on Council 1959–62 and as Vice-President 1962–65. His contribution to horticulture was marked by the Royal Horticultural Society's highest award of the Victoria Medal of Honour in 1956. In August 1970 he retired but only to throw himself into artistic activity with the Edinburgh College of Art and the Festival Society and the writing of a major book on the travels of Ludlow and Sherriff, *A Quest of Flowers* (1975).

The Royal Botanic Garden was remarkably transformed during Harold Fletcher's Keepership—others, government, staff and friends helped but his was the driving force. He never spared himself in work; he never failed to inspire others. He was a brilliant lecturer—his lecture, "Horticulture—Challenge and Opportunity", to the 17th International Horticultural



PLATE 3. Harold Roy Fletcher



Congress in Maryland is still vivid in the minds of those who heard it both for the breadth of its vision and the power of his eloquence. He was adept at casting an idea on the water and seeing what others would make of the fly. The Garden's debt to him will be long in repayment.

Truly it can be said of Harold Fletcher:

Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.

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