

ERIC VERNON WATSON (1914-1999)

Mark Lawley

email: m.lawley@virgin.net

This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Botanical career

Watson's *British Mosses and Liverworts* (1955, with subsequent editions in 1968 and 1981) was far the most useful introductory guide to identifying mosses and liverworts in Britain during the mid and late 20th century. Watson's consequent influence in developing the identification skills of bryologists during the second half of the 20th century was incalculably great.

He joined the British Bryological Society in 1946, acted as the Society's bibliographer for more than 25 years (1946-1972), as referee for the Bryaceae and *Philonotis* until his death, and was elected president in 1964-5, and subsequently an honorary member.

Family background and biography

Eric Vernon Watson was born in Cranleigh, Surrey on May 12th 1914, the second of three sons born to James George Watson (died 1931) and Mary Vernon (*née* Pearson, 1878). James Watson was born in Scotland, and became a banker and finance manager with business interests in the Congo of central Africa. Mary was born the sixth and youngest child of Luke William Pearson (1839-1886), a surveyor's clerk, and Anne (*née* Vernon, 1838). In 1871 the Pearsons lived in Hackney, London; by 1881 they had moved to Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Eric Watson attended Cranleigh School with his elder brother Bruce. All three brothers were good at art, and Eric's younger brother Donald became particularly accomplished, writing *A Bird Artist in Scotland* (1985).

From Cranleigh, Eric went to study botany at Edinburgh University, graduating B.Sc. in 1935, and Ph.D. in 1938. His brothers went to Edinburgh too (Donald at the Academy), and Mary Watson also moved to the city. Eric and Donald started the bird observatory on the Isle of May, and as a tyro in bryology Eric "found a dour, but kind and helpful mentor in William Young, Keeper of the bryological herbarium at the Royal Botanic

Garden”. (“*Ceratodon*, *Ceratodon*, ye’ve brought me *Ceratodon* again”, Young would exclaim when an enthusiastic Watson took him his latest gatherings.)

From Edinburgh, Watson went to Liverpool University (1938-9), and then took a Commonwealth Fellowship at Harvard (1939-40), before returning to England as senior lecturer at Harper Adams Agricultural College, Newport, Shropshire (1941-46). At Liverpool, Watson met his future wife, Joyce, who was a first-year student. They subsequently had four daughters: Rosemary, Alison, Erica and Jill.

In 1946, Watson joined the staff of Reading University’s Botany Department, where he remained until retirement in 1979.

Watson died of leukaemia on October 25th 1999.