

Obituary

## Richard William George Dennis (1910–2003): mycologist and savant

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R. W. G. Dennis, who was Head of Mycology at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for over 30 years and one of the most eminent and influential British mycologists of the 20th century, died on 7th June 2003 at the age of 92. His immense contributions to fungal taxonomy and plant pathology spanned almost 70 years and covered all major groups of fungi from the tropics to the poles. His seminal studies, frequently based on extensive and pioneering field work, have formed the basis for our understanding of the systematics of many groups, particularly amongst the discomycetes on which he was an acknowledged international authority.



*R. W. G. Dennis*

Fig. 1. Richard William George Dennis (1910–2003).

Richard William George Dennis was born on 13 July 1910 at Thornbury in Gloucestershire, the son of a schoolmaster. He attended Thornbury Grammar

School, to which he obtained a scholarship in 1919, and then Bristol University from 1927–1930. He had a keen interest in history and developed an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject, learned partly from his interest in stamps. He had an extensive general collection but also specialised in stamps depicting plants and fungi, even publishing on the latter in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* in 1959. He was particularly interested in botany, which he had been taught at school, and from an early age was familiar with the British flora using Johns' *Flowers of the Field*. Geology was another major interest, particularly palaeontology in which he was encouraged by his tutor Stanley Smith, an authority on rugose corals, and the important geological formations in the Bristol district offered valuable sites for field work. Being advised that the study of botany and geology offered better prospects than did history, he took his degree in these subjects. However, he was persuaded in his final honours year to turn to plant pathology and to undertake a thesis extending the work of Ronald M. Nattrass at Long Ashton Research Station, Bristol, concerning canker disease of basket willow. This was the subject of his first paper, published in the *Transactions of the British Mycological Society* in 1931. Plant pathology remained a life-long interest, and indeed the first part of his career, for over 15 years, was devoted entirely to aspects of this subject.

Dennis obtained a first class honours degree in botany and, unable to find employment in England, successfully obtained the post of assistant in the Plant Husbandry Department at the West of Scotland Agricultural College, Glasgow which he took up in September 1930. Whilst at Glasgow, under the

guidance of D. G. O'Brien, he studied mineral deficiencies in root crops and diseases of oats, the latter being the subject of a PhD obtained from Glasgow University in 1934. He also pursued his interest in geology and palaeontology, spending weekends studying the narrow limestone bands in the Lanarkshire coalfield as well as the geology of the Isle of Mull, and gradually amassed an extensive collection of British fossils. For a while he was a member of the Geological Society of Glasgow to which he presented a paper on the Hurler Limestone, the top of the carboniferous sequence. It was during his time at Glasgow that he became familiar with the Hebrides which became so important to his mycological interests in later years.

In 1937 he moved from Glasgow to take a position at the Plant Virus Station at Cambridge researching potato virus diseases, following up work initiated by the entomologist Kenneth Smith into methods of disease control. However, he found the study of viruses of little interest and, in 1939, was appointed assistant Plant Pathologist at the Department of Agriculture, Edinburgh, based at the seed testing station at East Craigs, Corstorphine. After the outbreak of war, Dennis spent his time during fire watching duties compiling a card-index catalogue of British fungi, as well as a catalogue of Scottish fungi. The latter was arranged according to the drainage areas devised for *Mycologia Scotica*, the classic 1879 work on Scottish fungi by Rev. John Stevenson. This catalogue, extended in later years, served as the basis for understanding the distribution of British fungi, a subject which was of special interest to Dennis and which he continued to investigate after his retirement. He also joined the Home Guard, becoming a 'tolerable rifle shot', and was recruited for the potato health certification inspections, which involved traversing entire crops, up and down the drills to check for varietal purity, leaf roll and mosaic infection, and black leg.

Dennis joined the staff at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew on 2 October 1944, succeeding Elsie Wakefield (1886–1972) as Head of Mycology on her retirement in 1951. He remained at Kew until his own retirement in 1975, receiving special merit promotion to the highest grade, then known as 'Senior Principal Scientific Officer'. In 1950 he and Miss Wakefield jointly published *Common British Fungi*, which was one of the few popular fungus books of the time. It was also important in that the species selected were based on collections in the Kew herbarium. It is extensively illustrated with watercolour paintings, largely prepared by Dennis. During his career he prepared many paintings and other illustrations of fungi which are of great scientific value, mostly vouchered by collections at Kew and still often the only ones available for many species. They include type studies, particularly of *Helotiales*, for which his illustrations remain a unique resource.

His early work at Kew continued with aspects of plant pathology, including an important study, published in 1946, of British species referred to the

coelomycete genus *Phoma*, which extended an investigation of those associated with potato diseases. However, his interests in fungal systematics and fungal geography were wide, his many publications covering most groups of fungi from tropical and temperate regions world-wide. In 1949 he visited Trinidad making collections of agarics and other basidiomycetes as well as ascomycetes. This visit initiated an important series of papers on the fungi of tropical America, which covered agarics, gastroid fungi and ascomycetes from the West Indies, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. In 1958 he visited Venezuela, again making many collections which formed the basis for a long series of papers on fungi. His *Fungus Flora of Venezuela and adjacent countries* was published in 1970, and is a classic work including plates of watercolour paintings and line drawings, often prepared in the field, which are still the only representation of many of the species. Though long out of print, the book remains a standard text and a sought-after reference for the area.

His work otherwise focussed most significantly on the ascomycetes, and also on British fungi. His contributions to ascomycete taxonomy ranged widely through most of the major groups, including the *Xylariaceae*, on which he was an acknowledged authority having published accounts of these fungi from tropical America and from the Congo. These contributions were noted by Rogers (2000) as 'the foundations of modern studies'. However, Dennis was best known as an authority on the discomycetes, with many published papers on the taxonomy of the *Pezizales* and *Helotiales*, both temperate and tropical. These included monographic and nomenclatural studies as well as accounts from South America and the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, Sierra Leone, Papua New Guinea, and Europe. Amongst them were the first comprehensive accounts of the British *Hyaloscyphaeae* (1949), followed by the *Helotiaceae* (1957). These accounts have still not been fully superseded and remain important for students of these fungi today. Of particular note was his *British Cup fungi and their Allies* (Ray Society, 1960), later expanded and revised as *British Ascomycetes* (Cramer, 1978, with a second supplemented edition in 1981). The book is again illustrated with his paintings and line drawings and was the first major treatment of these fungi, selling out within a year of its initial publication. It remains a basic text for British and European ascomycetes.

In 1975 Dennis visited the Azores and Madeira, making the first extensive collections of fungi from these islands. A comprehensive account of the fungi of the Azores was published in 1977, though he continued to maintain his interest in this isolated, mid-Atlantic archipelago, which he considered a key to understanding fungal biogeography.

His contributions to British fungi extended well beyond the ascomycetes to cover many basidiomycete groups and plant pathogens, as well as their history and distribution. In 1948 he published jointly with

Arthur A. Pearson (1874–1954) the first checklist of British agarics and boleti. In 1960 this was expanded and revised, in collaboration with Peter D. Orton and Frank B. Hora (1908–1984), as the *New Checklist of British Agarics and Boleti*, which has long remained a standard work only now in the process of revision as part of a comprehensive checklist currently being compiled at Kew. Studies of the Scottish fungi, particularly those of the Hebrides, were also of major interest, his first paper on that region, which appeared in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh*, being published in 1952. His continuing interest in the distribution of British fungi led to many further accounts from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as well as from England and Ireland.

Dennis spent much time developing and curating the herbarium collections at Kew. These are amongst the most comprehensive in the world, covering all groups of fungi and arranged in modern systematic order. His influence on these collections, in terms both of specimens and curation, has been substantial, and their current arrangement by geographical region and (where appropriate) by associated plant family has been largely achieved by his efforts. The incorporation in 1969 of the fungal collections previously held at the Natural History Museum was a particular challenge, overseen by Dennis and successfully tackled by a small staff.

Dennis was an academic of the highest calibre and possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of history and geography, the latter being of special value to the study of herbarium collections in interpreting obscure localities, frequently handwritten by early collectors and virtually illegible to the uninitiated. He also possessed an immense and remarkable knowledge of many related subjects, from geology and palaeontology to pre-history and archaeology, including standing stones and the history of Celtic crosses, and of medieval art and architecture.

Dennis was essentially a private man, and few knew him well. He was also a somewhat intimidating figure to many colleagues and visitors to Kew, but he was always willing to offer advice and assistance to those in need. He also had a keen sense of humour, well illustrated by his publication of the spoof genus *Golfballia*, presented with Latin diagnosis as a remarkable new genus of phalloid fungi, based actually on material of burnt golf balls received at Kew for identification! The 'type specimens' are still preserved in the Kew herbarium. On his retirement in July 1975, he was appointed Honorary Research Fellow at Kew. Since then, his interests continued to be with the ascomycetes, as well as the history and distribution of the British mycobiota. He continued to collect avidly, paying almost annual visits to the Hebrides and other parts of Scotland, sometimes for extended periods of time. He visited every one of the Hebridean islands, including St Kilda, the Orkneys and Shetland, and his collections,

housed at Kew, represent the most comprehensive record of these fungi anywhere. He made many contributions to these areas during the following 25 years, including his books *Fungi of the Hebrides* (1986) and *Fungi of South East England* (1995), both published at Kew. The former is a comprehensive listing and analysis of the Hebridean fungi, which he collected and studied over more than forty years. It also provides a detailed comparison with the rest of the British Isles, including a comprehensive list of the known British genera and world distribution of the Hebridean species. *Fungi of South East England* is a valuable complementary volume.

His last publication, *Fungi of Welsh Botany* in 1999, brought to attention a long overlooked account of the fungi of Anglesea, published by Hugh Davies in 1813, that was effectively the first comprehensive list of fungi to appear in a British county flora. In the succeeding years, he continued a keen interest in fungi, being a regular visitor at Kew until only a few days before his death, and doing much valuable revisionary work in the curation of the British herbarium collections.

No fewer than 40 species as well as five genera have been named in his honour. He was also awarded several other distinctions, being elected in 1975 an Honorary Member of the Swiss Society of Mycology, and a Corresponding Member of the Botanical Society of the Argentine, and in 1982 a Corresponding Member of the Mycological Society of America. He was also an Honorary Fellow of the Botanical Society of Scotland and, in 1987, was elected an Honorary Member of the British Mycological Society. Dennis died at home and was buried at the South Downs Natural Burial Site near East Meon, Hampshire on 30 June 2003.

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