

## Two of the Taxonomists mentioned in Notes 1-9

Throughout this series of short notes designed to help us through the lock down associated with Corvid 19 I have mentioned a number of people who named the species covered in the text. It is easy to forget that they were real people with lives outside of botanical matters. In this note I will try to give you some idea about two Australians who have contributed much to our systemising of the tree species in the families. These two short accounts are of very different people.

The names given by the formal taxonomy are not the whole story. The common names are far more widely known and vary enormously between regions and of course countries. It should be remembered that the first names given to Australian species were that of the aboriginal peoples who identified them for health, food, tools, and weapons.

The interesting book, *The Naming of Names The Search for Order in the World of Plants*, by Anna Pavord covers the early years of human attempts to rationalise and identify plants primarily for herbal medicines. It is no accident that many of the early botanists were firstly medical doctors. Most were from the upper classes as few men and very few women penetrated the class divide. Alfred Russel Wallace was an exception but never given the credit he deserved.

### **Lawrence Alexander Sidney Johnson**

L.A.S. Johnson was born on the 26th June 1925 in Cheltenham Sydney and attended Parramatta High School. He was awarded a scholarship and studied Botany at Sydney University graduating with First Class Honours in 1948.

He joined the staff of the National Herbarium, the scientific component of the Royal Botanic Gardens, which was in the doldrums awaiting young and enthusiastic people such as himself. He worked there for his entire career. First as Botanist, later Director and finally as Honorary Research Associate.

During his time as Botanist he established a very productive collaboration with Lindsay Pryor. In 1962 he was appointed

Australian Botanical Liaison Officer, which meant a twelve month posting to Kew.

As Director from 1972 he enhanced the image of the Gardens with politicians, a good strategy, which resulted in funding for projects such as the development of gardens at Mount Tomah and Mount Annan.

In 1950 he married Merle Hodge. A marriage which sustained him in his work producing five children and surviving separation for the time he was at Kew.

Johnson was forced to retire in 1985 by government policy. A decision which left him bitter. Even so he continued to work until his death.

His work with Pryor and others on *Eucalyptus* took him on field trips to all parts Australia to see species growing in their natural environment. The classification of eucalypts by Pryor and Johnson was a seminal work built on later by people such as Ian Brooker.

His first and lifelong revision of the *Casuarina*, with Karen Wilson has been mentioned in previous notes.

Johnson worked on a wide range of Australian plants and published an enormous amount. He is honoured with a number of plant names including *Eucalyptus johnsoniana* by Brooker and Blaxell.

His international reputation was summed up by Peter Raven Director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens in the following way

*'Our knowledge of Australian plants has been greatly improved as a result of the industrious, intelligent and forceful career of Lawrie Johnson. He has given us new insight into several of the most important groups of plants in Australia – ones that are leading components in the vegetation, and most interesting biogeographically He was never afraid to take on difficult problems in systematics, and he made important contributions to our understanding*

*of every group that he studied. Few have or could have accomplished so much'.*

He died in 1997. A sometimes difficult man he left a lasting legacy on the botany of Australia and should be better known by people interested in the subject.

Roger Hnatiuk recalls the following encounter with Johnson

*Lawrie was formidable, by anyone's account. I remember being berated by him as he had gone to the back blocks of the SE edges of the SW of WA to find a locale where I collected a new species of eucalypt. When I made the field trip, perhaps 10-15 years previous, there were scarcely anything that could be called a road, more a grader scrape through the shrubbery, and the maps were only 1:250,000 with dotted lines for the possible roads. While my field notes were detailed (...turned left, travelled 11.5km then right 3.2km, stopped vehicle and walked half hour north to hill where collected euc and other species...). He spent hours trying to find the location, but everything had changed. He was not happy and I never forgot the encounter.*

### **Helen Joan Hewson**

Helen Joan Hewson was born in Benalla on the 24th June 1938 She went to school there and then to Melbourne University, later at Sydney University completing her B.Sc. with first class honours. In 1967 she was awarded her PhD for her work on the thallose liverwort family *Aneurcaeeae* which remained a life long interest.

In 1975 she was awarded a grant from the Australian Biological Resources Study to develop sample treatments for the *Flora of Australia*. Following this she worked with Alex George to develop a template for descriptions which remains in place today. She worked as a writer and editor of more than 25 families in nine volumes of the Flora. Her ability in art meant she could produce accurate illustrations in pen and ink. Her interest in art was developed more fully after retirement.

Volume 28 was dedicated to her in 1986 at the end of her ABRS career.

Four Australian plants honour her; *Plagiochila hewsoniana*, *Jungermannia hewsoniae*, *Fossombronia hewsoniae*, and *Cassinia hewsoniae*.

Hewson and Alex George developed and updated most of the documentation surrounding the *Flora of Australia*. Her input to the *Flora's Guide for Contributors and the Guide for Illustrators* was substantial, especially for illustrators. The unique and innovative *Plant Indumentum,- A Handbook of Terminology* was another very useful contribution, providing a practical guide in a field of diverse opinions.

Her interests ranged widely. With her husband Leon Freund she first became interested in Australian Cattle Dogs. After Leon's death in 1975 she concentrated on breeding and exhibiting Hungarian Pulis and gained her Working Dog Licence. She became a respected national judge.

Helen's active retirement provided the opportunity to write the landmark book *Australia—300 years of Botanical Illustration*. It is an erudite and beautifully illustrated account of the history and science of plant illustration in Australia and the development of botany as a science both globally and in Australia. Helen was a very competent artist and champion of botanical artists, past and present. She was instrumental in promoting the work of the 19th Century Australian woman artist Ellis Rowan, and drawing attention to a number of other previously under acknowledged illustrators of Australian plants.

She did find time for research, and is responsible for one new family, two new genera, 54 new species and seven new infraspecific taxa.

Helen Hewson died in 2007 and as Annette Wilson and Judy West ended their obituary in the Australian Systematic Botany Society Newsletter 133 38

*'left lasting legacies on many fronts, her impact will be felt well into the future by her friends, colleagues and future*

*generations of taxonomists, systematists and botanical illustrators'.*

This brief outline of just two people attempts to show that names we see as abbreviations at the end of the names of species are real people with lives which are much the same as everyone else. It highlights two important modern Australian botanists and illustrates the way society now allows people of talent to contribute to taxonomy (and all other fields) in a way which was inconceivable in the time when many species were named by 'men of means' in Europe.

I am grateful for the assistance of Roger Hnatiuk in compiling this brief outline of the work of his friend Helen Hewson and the anecdote about Laurie Johnson.

## Letter to the Editor

PNG has peaks ranging up to half the height of Everest 4,884m compared to 8,848m but little research has taken place in the very high country in recent decades. There is a species of banana, *Musa ingens*, which grows tall enough for its leaves to spread out above the *Nothofagus* trees, at heights above sea level up to, and possibly above, the altitude of frosts frequently above 2,200m. The once named 'Mt Wilhelmina', the tallest on NG, is now *Puncak Jaya*; the tallest in PNG is Mt Wilhelm at 4,509m. PNG has 14 species of *Nothofagus* some reaching 41m. *Nothofagus* forests start above 1,500m. The hardwoods are very useful - when I was working with villagers (through Big Man net works) to establish cattle fences in the late 1960s early 1970s, the red dense timber was exceptionally good for fence posts. I enjoyed walking through the high *Nothofagus* moss forests - village food gardens had stumps of *Nothofagus* chipped down with stone axes. The timber is recognised as a good hardwood for export. I think that with the drive of a rapidly expanding nation, up from over two million at

Independence, to an estimated 10 million now; and expected to exceed the population of Australia within a generation or so this useful hardwood of the highland provinces which is the most densely populated part of PNG will be under serious threat.

Dennis Nicholls

Steve Thomas

4/6/2020