

Memorabilia

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Scientific heritage of Robert Desmond Meikle (1923–2021)

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Desmond Meikle in his garden, September 2011.
Photograph by Alex George.

On the 12th of August of this year there was a Memorial Lunch for Robert Desmond Meikle in the Village Hall at Wootton Courtenay, Somerset, UK, where friends and colleagues of Desmond came to celebrate his life and work. This event was organized by the closest friends of Desmond, Jeanne and Tim Webb, with the help of his local community. Although the Memorial Lunch began with a formal speech by Sir Roger Carrick, KCMG LVO FRGS, the afternoon continued in a very informal way in which people who knew Desmond shared their memories about him. Sadly, Desmond's relatives who live in Australia could not come to the Memorial Lunch because of Covid travel restrictions.

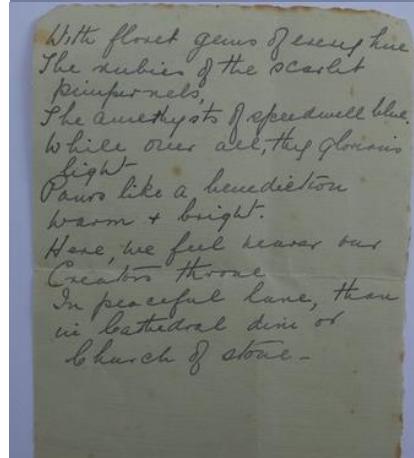
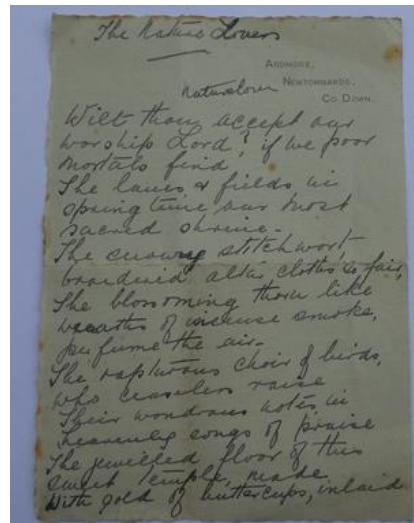
Desmond was a lovely man who showed a very special side of his personality to each of those who came to the Memorial Lunch. A unique item shared at this memorial that touched the hearts of attendees was a poem which had been given to Desmond by his mother. This poem was written on a very narrow piece of paper and had been kept by him since he left his family home in Ireland. Desmond always had with him in his wallet this old and fragile piece of paper with the poem handwritten on it as a good luck charm and his most valuable and memorable item that now will be inherited by his descendants (pers. comm. I.V. Belyaeva with J. Webb, 2021). The unchanged text of this poem is cited below with the permission of Jeanne Webb:

"THE NATURE LOVERS"

Ardmore,
Newtownards,
Co. Down

Naturelover

Wilt thou accept our
worship Lord? If we poor
mortals find
The lanes and fields in spring time our most
sacred shrine –
The snowy stitchwort,
broidered altar cloths so fair;
The blossoming thorn-like
wreaths of incense smoke,
perfume the air –
The rapturous choir of birds,
who ceaseless raise
Their wondrous notes in
heavenly songs of praise.
The jewelled floor of this
sweet temple, made
With gold of buttercups, inlaid
with floret gems of every hue.
The rubies of the scarlet
pimpernels,
The amethysts of speedwell blue.
While over all, thy glorious
light
Pours like a benediction
warm and bright.
Here, we feel nearer our
Creator's throne
In peaceful lane, than
in Cathedral dim
or Church of Stone”



Handwritten poem 'The Nature Lovers' that was given to Desmond by his mother when he left his family home in Ireland. Photograph of original by Jeanne Webb.

This invisible bond with his mother which influenced his whole life and work, Desmond carried with him through his best and worst times. He called the time, when he was united with his mother in their love of plants and they scanned together the seed catalogues for novelties to grow in their big garden, the happiest time of his life. Desmond also recalled the day which he, as a boy, spent with his mother at Kew Gardens and described this place as a paradise, the definition of this institution, later his place of work, which he kept to the end of his life.

It was a nice initiative by Jeanne and Tim Webb to ask participants at the Memorial Lunch to bring a single flower from their gardens as they knew that it would have pleased Desmond. The bouquet that can be seen in the photograph reflects a beautiful and special collective acknowledgement to the extraordinary person who was Desmond Meikle.



Bouquet for Desmond of flowers from the gardens of the attendees at his Memorial Lunch

This essay is a tribute to Desmond who made the life of everybody who knew him a little bit better, happier, more interesting, and filled with the hope that one person can do a lot of good things during their period on this planet. Desmond's life was an example to follow – all about plants, botany, botanists and the care of people and their feelings. Even those people who did not know Desmond personally can value his personality by listening to the recordings archived in the Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (1983). One of these recordings on CDs was made at his retirement dinner in the Pavilion Restaurant and contains speeches which transfer us in time

and bring us nostalgic memories of the warm and friendly atmosphere of the 'good old days.' Despite Desmond's great sense of humour, one can feel grains of sadness in his voice in saying 'goodbye' to his place of work although he had big plans for his retirement doing what he sincerely loved. At the end of his life, looking back in time, he said that if he would have the possibility to live again, he could not imagine a better place for him to work than Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Another recording is Desmond's lecture, in two parts, about the largest project of his life 'Flora of Cyprus' that shows his professionalism as a botanist and lecturer because, even without seeing the slides that he illustrated his talk with, one can listen for the hour and a half without noticing time flying. His calm and confident manner of talking, the timbre of his voice,

and jokes along the way make one feel excited and encouraged to go to Cyprus and see all the mentioned plants and landscapes with one's own eyes or, at least, read all the publications by Desmond about this wonderful country and its nature. This Flora, in two volumes, (Meikle, 1977, 1985) covers 141 families of vascular plants and contains 31 new scientific names of plants, all but one published by Desmond, with the inclusion of 157 professionally made illustrations. The comprehensive list of collectors and collections used by Desmond to produce the Flora is given in both volumes. All the herbarium specimens collected and identified by Desmond are stored in the Herbarium of RBG, Kew, in support of the information presented in the Flora and are a great help to following generations in understanding the taxonomic opinion of the author. Desmond said that the Flora of Cyprus was a big target of his scientific career and was completed just before his retirement and published a year later in 1984.

Communicating with Desmond either in person or indirectly, one could feel trust and encouragement in anything – plant identification, writing scientific papers, gardening, teaching, or helping people. Collecting information bit by bit from the people who knew Desmond we noticed how the faces of people shine just on hearing his name. Everyone we asked said that Desmond was a very knowledgeable though modest and witty person. It was Desmond's best joke when he wrote the story of his life 'Tantus Amor Florum: An informal biographical sketch' (dated as 2001, pers. comm. I.V. Belyaeva with R.K. Brummitt, 2010) which was distributed by him only to his friends but not for public consumption. It was written for people who he knew and who he trusted and for whom this information was priceless. The text was written with Desmond's usual bright irony, expert knowledge, and love of plants. Lucky are those who have read his 'Tantus' because it is a piece of written art one can read again and again. We believe that one day Desmond's 'Tantus' will be published and will belong to the timeless historical heritage of this great scientist. He wrote the 'Tantus' at 80 years old describing in great details his childhood, education and years of establishment as a taxonomist at RBG, Kew. Some non-personal information from 'Tantus' was used by Jeanne Webb (2021) in her essay *A brief account of Desmond's life* a copy of which has been donated to the Library of RBG, Kew.

To understand the taxonomic view of a scientist one must know the way of scientific thinking of that person and read between the lines of their publications. Desmond understood that taxonomy could not exist without nomenclature and his genuine interest in the latter was reflected in his serving as a member of the Editorial Committee of the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (EC of ICBN) for three terms. He was appointed to the EC at Seattle in 1969, re-appointed at Leningrad in 1975 and at Sidney in 1981 (pers. comm. I.V. Belyaeva

with J. McNeill in 2021). He wrote a few nomenclatural papers and proposals, collaborating with John McNeill and Richard K. Brummitt.



Desmond Meikle in the Library at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1969. Photograph by Alex George.

complexity of lectotypification of Linnaean taxa. Desmond accepted infraspecific variability and understood well the challenges of infraspecific taxonomy. He said that in some cases one cannot divide taxa without a complex study of all possible characteristics at all possible levels (i.e. morphological, ecological, geographical, genetical etc.) and, sometimes, identifying a plant, one cannot succeed using existing categories and methods as nature evolves independently of human categories (pers. comm. I. V. Belyaeva with R.D. Meikle, 2005).

Desmond used cataloguing often in his work and, in 1980–1983 at RBG, Kew, he supervised the compilation of a list of ‘standard forms’ of abbreviated names of authors of vascular plants (Meikle and Halliday, 1980). Later, this list was used in the publication *Authors of plant names* (Brummitt & Powell, 1992). Although Desmond himself did not use a computer, relying on his handwriting and typewriter, he wrote about the ‘possibilities of mechanization and computerization’ in the early 1970s (Meikle, 1971). He suggested transforming paper

Discussing taxonomic ranks and deciding where to draw the line between closely related taxa Desmond said that he preferred to call them species rather than subspecies. As the Botanical Secretary of the Systematics Association, he was involved in taxonomic discussions and so, in his work, he used the prevailing taxonomic approach, also following nomenclatural rules. In his recorded lecture on the Flora of Cyprus he emphasised the importance of types and typification and their citation in taxonomic publications. However, he pointed out that this cannot happen without cataloguing information about the original material and seeing herbarium specimens thereby anticipating the modern digitization of herbarium type specimens and the

volumes of Index Kewensis into digital form. Nowadays we are not only happily using Index Kewensis in digital form as a part of the nomenclatural database, International Plant Name Index (IPNI, 2021), but this database is the backbone of all other databases at RBG, Kew including the taxonomic databases, the World Checklist of Vascular Plants (WCVP, 2021) and Plants of the World Online (POWO, 2021), which are currently used worldwide on a daily basis. Using IPNI, the list of scientific names published by R.D. Meikle was compiled and together with the names of plants named in his honour are listed in the Appendix. Desmond joked that he collected a lot of plants, and his ‘name has become attached to some of them’, even ‘to the ugliest and most ungainly’ named nowadays *Euphorbia desmondii*.

As a member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) since 1947 Desmond had a special subject to study and write about – family Salicaceae. The most well known publications of his on the subject are *Willows and poplars of Great Britain and Ireland* (Meikle, 1984), and taxonomic treatments on the genus *Salix* L. in two books by C.A. Stace with colleagues (Stace, 1975 and Stace *et al.*, 2015). *Hybrid Flora of the British Isles* (Stace *et al.*, 2015), won the prestigious Engler European Silver Medal and received a special mention for its very long chapter written by R.D. Meikle and D. Tennant. (pers. comm. I.V. Belyaeva with J. Webb, 2021). In 2000 Desmond became an Honorary Member of BSBI (Webb, 2021). The contribution of Desmond in studying the family Salicaceae deserves undoubtedly special attention in a separate publication.

Before Desmond moved to a care home from his house at Ranscombe Lodge he burned all his paperwork, correspondence, photographs, documents and other personal belongings as he thought that they could not be of interest to anybody (pers. comm. I.V. Belyaeva with Jeanne Webb, 2021). To the best of our ability, we compiled the list of publications by Desmond (see Appendix) using Kew Record of Taxonomic Literature (1971–2007) and all other available sources of information. Desmond described his most important projects, reflecting his scientific career, in his unpublished ‘Tantus’ but the real value of each of his publications can be discovered by everyone reading them as they were written in a simple lively language, encouraging the reader to become a follower of his passion in plants, botany as whole, taxonomy and nomenclature in particular. Now it is your choice – what to read, study and follow.

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Appendix

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Eriocaulon intrusum Meikle, Kew Bull. 22(1): 141. 1968.

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- Inula conyzae* (Griess.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 890, 1897. 1985, nom. illeg. later homonym.
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Alkanna tuberculata (Forssk.) Meikle, Kew Bull. 34(4): 823. 1980, nom. illeg. later homonym.

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- Papaver minus* (Boiv. ex Bél.) Meikle, Kew Bull. 11(3): 545. 1957.
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- Cedrus libani* A.Rich. subsp. *brevifolia* (Hook.f.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 1: 22, 806. 1977.
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- Limonium ocymifolium* (Poir.) Kuntze subsp. *bellidifolium* (Sm.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 1070, 1897. 1985.
- Primulaceae
- Cyclamen coum* Mill. var. *caucasicum* (K.Koch) Meikle, Fl. Turkey 6: 133. 1978.
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- Ziziphus zizyphus* (L.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 1: 358, 806. 1977.
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- Prunus arabica* (Olivier) Meikle, Kew Bull. 19(2): 229. 1965.
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- Scrophulariaceae
- Orobanche minor* Sutton var. *pubescens* (d'Urv.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 1242, 1897. 1985.
- Thymelaeaceae
- Thymelaea passerina* (L.) Coss. & Germ. subsp. *pubescens* (Guss.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 1427, 1897. 1985.
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- Centranthus calcitrapae* (L.) Dufr. subsp. *orbiculatus* (Sm.) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 838, 1897. 1985.
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- Phyla filiformis* (Schrader) Meikle, Fl. Cyprus 2: 1249, 1897. 1985.

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Searsia anchietae (Ficalho & Hiern) Moffett f. *suffruticosa* (Meikle) Moffett, Bothalia 37(2): 167. 2007.

Searsia blanda (Meikle) Moffett, Bothalia 37(2): 167. 2007.

Searsia blanda (Meikle) Moffett f. *exelliana* (Meikle) Moffett, Bothalia 37(2): 167. 2007.

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Searsia monticola (Meikle) Moffett, Bothalia 37(2): 170. 2007.

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Searsia squalida (Meikle) Moffett, Bothalia 37(2): 172. 2007.

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Anthemis tricolor Boiss. subsp. *plutonia* (Meikle) Govaerts, World Checkl. Seed Pl. 1(1): 8. 1995.

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Phlomis cypria Post subsp. *occidentalis* (Meikle) Hand, Willdenowia 33(2): 318. 2003.

Satureja chionistrae (Meikle) Greuter & Burdet, Willdenowia 14(2): 303. 1985.

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Boerhavia arabica (Meikle) Govaerts, World Checkl. Seed Pl. 2(1-2): 11. 1996.

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Boerhavia sinuata (Meikle) Greuter & Burdet, Willdenowia 16(2): 448. 1987.

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Limonium cyprium (Meikle) Hand & Buttler, Willdenowia 33(2): 315. 2003.

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Euphorbiaceae *Euphorbia desmondii* Keay & Milne-Redh., *Kew Bull.* 10(1): 139. 1955.
Myrtaceae *Eucalyptus desmondensis* Maiden & Blakely, *Journ. Roy. Soc. N. S. Wales* 59: 183. 1925.