



Memorabilia

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An appreciation of Desmond Meikle, botanist, teacher and friend

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Desmond in the Lake District, UK, 2003.
Photograph by Jeanne Webb

It would be true to say that meeting Desmond Meikle was one of life's great gifts to us. Neither my husband, Tim, nor I had known him during his working life at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG, Kew) but when he retired to his home in West Somerset in 1983 a friendship was forged which endured until his death in 2021.

We had little idea of the magnitude of his distinguished career as a botanist because at that time most of our discussions centred around a love of plants. However, we quickly became aware that here was a mind of extraordinary depth in a man with a prodigious memory for names and places and, very importantly, someone who was not afraid to challenge the world when it was in error.

He was essentially a quiet man, lonely is too strong a word, but he 'lit up' in company and was

generous and entertaining to all. We concluded that a reserved childhood in Ireland contributed to his sensitivities and uncertainties but did not prevent him from being somewhat dominant at times, nor did he mince his words if necessary. We took him out to dinner on one occasion and, although the room was relatively small, he waxed lyrically on the subject of human existence including life, death and everything in between. After dinner, as we left, the diners at the next table remarked "we enjoyed your friend's conversation more than our own".

One of Desmond's hidden qualities was his absolute love of all nature, ranging from the most microscopic creature to the fossil remains of long-dead dinosaurs, all being an absolute delight and wonder to him. As geology goes hand in hand with botany, he would

marvel at the Jurassic beds of our local sea cliffs and was very impressed when we found a fossil fern, now in the Natural History Museum, London (BM). He was ahead of the world where invertebrates were concerned, and pollinators were valued for their essential connection with his scientific interest in the biology of plants. For a whole summer he would not use his own front door because a large hornets' nest hung over the doorway, bats flew in his bedroom and his loft had a magnificent array of live wasp nests hanging from the rafters. As with fauna, so with flora, for little difference was made in his garden between cultivated plants and wild ones – they excited him equally.

It wasn't long before we became aware of Desmond's interest in the family *Salicaceae* and we often took him to places where he could exercise his expert knowledge. There was one place in Somerset called Sedgemoor which was a watery landscape of willows of all kinds, and it was always his choice to spend time there. One interesting day was spent in the willow fields of the basket-making community. It was astonishing how many varieties were involved in weaving of willows to make baskets, coffins, furniture and decorative items. Over sixty different variants were grown mostly using *Salix triandra* L., *S. purpurea* L. and *S. viminalis* L. The most popular one was called *S.* 'Black Maul' which was derived from *S. triandra*. A further favourite place was in the adjacent county of Devon, at a large coastal site of sand dunes



Desmond (L) and Tim Webb (R) picnicking with a group of young botanists in Cumbria. Photograph by Jeanne Webb

and willow carr called Braunton Burrows. Here was willow heaven for all of us in the undisturbed landscape with *S. repens* L. being the dominant willow. We made regular visits finding unusual willow hybrids such as *S. viminalis* × *S. repens* = *S. × friesiana*.

As a member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) and referee for *Salicaceae*, Desmond often held courses in other parts of the British Isles and, in his retirement, we were able to take him to some of them. I found he had a delightful teaching manner with endless patience for those who showed an interest and he often invited them to give their opinion after his short description of characteristics of the plant in question, always

commending those who were correct. He was full of energy and would spend day after day walking long distances in all sorts of weather, keeping up with those who were half his age. He found that educating members of the BSBI was a rewarding and energising part of his work, particularly with the young as he could relate to them very effectively and much laughter was shared between him and his pupils.

Desmond's work in identifying willows was time-consuming and I offered to help with the administrative work. For many years I handled correspondence and postages all the while learning about the identifications of the specimens sent to him. Eventually, sensing my interest, he spent time teaching me until I was familiar with many species and then hybrids. He taught me how and when to choose a specimen and which parts of the plant to take. He also advised



Desmond with the author and *Salix × friesiana* at Branton Burrows, Devon, UK, in 2009. Photograph by Tim Webb

me to note habitats and colouring of twigs, leaves and trunk so that, what seemed at first a fairly straightforward task, became a complex journey searching for the correct characteristics to find the appropriate identity. Sometime after, following many years of working with him in the field, I collected a willow that did not fit descriptions of any of the ones I knew and consultation with Desmond confirmed that he was of the same opinion. It was the beginning of another new experience – that of describing and naming a hybrid, *Salix × permixta* Jeanne Webb, with the

necessary benefit of his expertise. I continue to use my amateur identification skills locally but miss his and help and guidance.

When Desmond was working in the Herbarium at RBG, Kew, he often had to go to the Library to look up a reference. He would remember the page numbers and find the references and answers he required then return to his desk without needing to write anything down but able to replicate every word and reference he had read together with page and paragraph numbers. As time went on, now and again he faltered and he had to use pen and paper, this becoming more frequent which annoyed him considerably and gradually, nearing retirement, he said to himself “the writing is on the wall.” He found the hardest part of old age was losing the facility of a memory that had never failed him. Nonetheless, he enjoyed 30 years of productive life in retirement at his home and extensive garden but eventually accepted a quiet life with good grace at the age of 95. Thereafter, he could only enjoy the peace that professional care provided until his death at the age of 97 in 2021.



Desmond with the thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*, in 1999. Photograph by Jeanne Webb

Desmond was always grateful for our help and companionship over the years although we received far more from him in return, through his teaching, his scholarly conversations and in the unique wisdom born of his life's experience. He was an exceptional man and has left us with warm feelings of appreciation, happiness at the time spent in his company and gratitude for our lasting friendship.