

Stephen L. Jury

R. D. Meikle 1923–2021

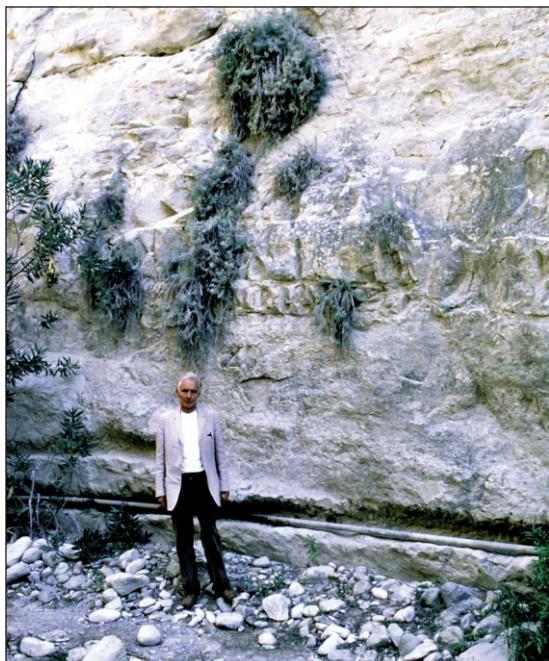


Fig. 1. Desmond Meikle in Cyprus in c. 1990 on Mount Akamas with the endemic *Centaurea akamantas* T.Georgiadis & Hadjik. on the limestone rocks (photo by Jeanne Webb).

when expounding to Meikle on the subject, stepped through a trap door. (No Health and Safety Officer in those days!) Meikle reported “Summerhayes was shaken, but not stirred”, his favourite of many Kew tales.

I visited Kew as a research student working on the genus *Torilis* in 1972 when I encountered Mr Meikle in the *Umbelliferae* bay in the Herbarium working on the Cypriot specimens. We had a great and valuable discussion and he offered to take me to lunch in his regular haunt, Newens—the Original Maids of Honour, on Kew Road, but not until 2 p.m. I survived until then with the help of a ‘Mars’ chocolate bar. After the meal, the lateness was

Robert Desmond Meikle (known as Desmond) was born 18th May 1923 in Newtonards, County Down, Northern Ireland and although always greatly interested in nature and especially plants, read law at Trinity College, Dublin. After graduation, he moved to London to work in the Civil Service and started visiting The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in his spare time. The staff were obviously very impressed with his botanical knowledge as they offered him a job in the Herbarium. After working on the flora of West Africa, he became head of the Middle Eastern section and in 1950 started work on his *Flora of Cyprus*.

His *Times* obituary (*The Times*, Wednesday 24 March 2021) records that he first worked for Summerhayes, Kew’s celebrated orchid specialist who featured in Ian Flemming’s James Bond novel *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* and

revealed as the waitress came out with the remains of luncheon, foil wrapped with instructions for how to heat it up for supper in his nearby apartment! He lived at weekends in his Somerset home and garden in Wootton Courtenay and used up his annual leave in half days commuting there at weekends.

Meikle became known for a very useful Kew publication in 1980: *Draft Index of Author Abbreviations compiled at The Herbarium Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew* which grew into *Authors of Plant Names* edited by R. K. Brummitt and C.E. Powell and published again by Kew in 1992. It is Meikle's work that is the foundation for the abbreviation of botanists' names and taken on by IPNI.org, the on-line International Plant Names Index and recognised by The Taxonomic Databases Working Group and now rebranded as Biodiversity Information Standards (TDWG) as a standard to use in all databases to facilitate data exchange.

Meikle used his legal mind to great effect in his comprehension of the laws of botanical nomenclature and was appointed to the Editorial Committee of the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature at Seattle in 1969, re-appointed in Leningrad in 1975 and again at Sydney in 1981. He was the clear choice for all Kew botanists to go to with their nomenclatural problems.

At home he made Willows and Poplars his special subject and published a Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) Handbook (number 4, *Willows and Poplars of Great Britain and Ireland*) on them in 1984 and kept in print and still available from the Society's book agent. He kept his interest in these and remained a BSBI referee for many years receiving specimens from members for identification. However, his catholic interest in plants meant that he published a great many papers on a huge range of taxa, but his 30-year research and study on the Cyprus flora gave rise to his magnum opus. He paid many visits to the island for fieldwork and recognised eight phytogeographical regions listing a specimen for each of the regions of occurrence. His nomenclature with full synonymy and complete botanical descriptions set the standard for all subsequent Floras. He methodically worked his way around the Kew Herbarium examining, not just all the material from Cyprus but checking this for any variation in other areas. He gave a final seminar at Kew: "The Flora of Cyprus: a Completed Project".

His scientific publications are listed by Belyaeva & Brough (2021) along with a local appreciation. Sadly, before moving to live in a care home, he burnt all his papers, correspondence and photographs in the belief that nobody would want them.

He was a popular member of his local Somerset community and freely gave support and advice, and thus it was no surprise that they organised a memorial luncheon for him which raised funds for the Somerset Wildlife Trust to provide trees to plant to increase local biodiversity. Guests were also asked to bring a flower from their garden to the luncheon to create a memorial vase on the day. However, a legacy of the Desmond Meikle Award features in the Koestler Awards and has enabled prisoners to engage in and demonstrate botanical art. The winner of the 2021 Meikle Award is enti-

tled ‘Delicate Flowers’ by a prisoner, Stephen, in HM Prison, Albany on the Isle of Wight. How pleased Desmond would have been by this.

References

- Belyaeva, I. V. & Brough, C. 2021: Scientific heritage of Robert Desmond Meikle (1923–2021). – *Skvortsovia* 7(3): 24–43. http://dx.doi.org/10.51776/2309-6500_2021_7_3_24

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