

OBITUARY

GUNNAR DEGELIUS

27 January 1903–22 July 1993



With the death of Prof. Gunnar Degelius, who passed away on 22 July 1993, the British Lichen Society has lost one of its most respected Honorary Members, and world lichenology its Grand Old Man.

Degelius was born in Uppsala on 27 January 1903, but spent most of his childhood in Mariestad, a small city on Lake Vänern. His father, Bror Nilsson, was a pharmacist and amateur botanist, who very early on introduced his son to botany. Gunnar Nilsson (he changed his name to Degelius in 1932) already had a quite comprehensive collection of phanerogams by the age of six (now in GB), and at 12 he collected his first lichen, *Peltigera canina*, a specimen still in his herbarium. The family then moved to Göteborg where he met an amateur lichenologist, Captain Carl Stenholm (1862–1939) and also the famous Adolf Hugo Magnusson (1885–1964) both of whom inspired his lichenological

inquisitiveness. After his matriculation at Göteborg in 1923, Degelius began his academic studies in Uppsala. He soon found himself attracted to the circles around the radiant Prof. Rutger Sernander (1866–1944) at the Växtbiologiska Institutionen, and it was here in 1935 that he was awarded his doctorate for *Das ozeanische Element der Strauch- und Laubflechtenflora von Skandinavien*. This work is a classic and typical of his approach to lichenology, with meticulous treatments of taxonomy, nomenclature and ecology. For many years, docent Gunnar Degelius joined a famous group of lichenologists including Sten Ahlner (1904–1991), Torsten Hasselrot (1903–1970) and Rolf Santesson under Prof. G. Einar Du Rietz (1895–1967).

In 1955 Degelius moved back to Göteborg to take up a post at the botanic garden and herbarium. From 1962 he lectured in systematic botany at the university, and introduced many students to the fascinating field of botany. He retired from his position in 1969. Degelius was appointed professor *honoris causa* in 1965, and elected an Honorary Member of the British Lichen Society in 1976.

Degelius soon started to travel around the world, first in Europe including the USSR. He subsequently visited all continents (except Antarctica), including such exotic areas as Angola, the Congo, Fiji, French Guyana and New Caledonia. The present writer had the pleasure of accompanying him on an unforgettable excursion to The Azores in 1986 and had all the travelling expenses paid for as well. Degelius collected his last lichens in Estonia in 1991. His large lichen herbarium (about 50 000 specimens) has now been transferred to Uppsala (UPS). Degelius named material from many parts of the world, describing some 124 new taxa, mainly at the species level, and the genus *Cavernularia*. Numerous additional new taxa described by other authors have been based on his collections, and some dedicated to him, including the genus *Degelia*.

Over the years, Degelius published some 130 scientific papers, mostly on lichens. However, he also communicated notes on phanerogams, non-lichenized fungi and mosses. His first scientific study, on *Arthonia spadicea*, appeared in 1923. Since then he published continuously up to the present time, and two papers will appear posthumously. Very few lichenologists, or scientists generally, can show a production spanning seventy years. Floristic studies were one of his interests. An early example is the lichen flora of Ångermanland, published in 1931. This was followed by similar surveys of Norra Skaftön (1939), Ornö (1942) and other parts of Sweden, as well as several Norwegian and Danish sites, Alaska and The Aleutian Islands (1937), North America (1940, 1941), The Azores (1941), Iceland (1957), and more recently the islands of Vega (1982), and Anhold (1986). The biology and ecology of lichens are other fields where he made important contributions, for example on the competition among saxicolous lichens (1940). The peculiar diaspore 'lichenized hormocysts' is one of his discoveries (1945). Most valuable are perhaps Degelius' two papers (1964, 1978) on the succession of lichens on *Fraxinus* twigs. These disclose the extreme exactitude and patience with which he worked. Using the yearly growth of the branches he dated the settlement of species and made important contributions to our understanding of dispersal and establishment of corticolous lichens.

In 1936 Degelius' first paper on *Collema* appeared. This was a prelude to what became a life-long interest in the genus. The magnificent monograph of the European species appeared in 1954, and after a further 20 years, his world monograph of this notoriously difficult genus was completed in 1974. This is perhaps the work for which he is best known, and for it he was awarded a well-deserved Linnean gold medal by the Kungliga Fysiografiska Sällskapet in Lund, a rarely issued distinction. A last contribution to the knowledge of this genus (two new species) will be published in the *Nordic Journal of Botany* in 1994 (as no. 7 in his series 'Studies in the lichen family Collemataceae').

During the last thirty years, Degelius lived in Askim, Göteborg, where he established a very hospitable home together with his sister and brother-in-law. Many lichenologists were invited to his villa to discuss lichenological matters, enjoy excellent food and drinks and look at the famous library and herbarium. There he resided with a cigar at his writing desk, with a neatly preserved adder in a bottle upon it (snakes were one of his hobbies). Degelius was a bibliophile and his marvellous collection of lichenological books, probably the biggest in the world in private hands, extended over some 45 m of shelf space. There were all the classical works including original editions by Linnaeus, Acharius, Fries and others. Among rare and finely illustrated works might be mentioned: a complete set of Sowerby's *English Botany*; Hoffmann, *Plantae Lichenosae*; Delise, *Histoire des lichens: Genre Sticta*; Dillenius, *Historia Muscorum* (a rare hand-coloured copy of the first edition); Oeder, *Flora Danica*; Jacquin, *Collectanea ad Botanicam*; Morison, *Plantarum Historiae Universalis Oxoniensis*; etc. His library is now housed in the Department of Systematic Botany in Uppsala.

Degelius was the most considerate, patient and helpful advisor that a student could have wished for. He gave willingly of his time, knowledge and publications and was always quick to encourage and praise in his gentle manner. For many young lichenologists it was an hour of intense enjoyment to meet with him at the second IAL symposium at Hemmeslöv, south Sweden, in 1992. Here he was awarded the first Acharius medal, an adequate homage to an outstanding contribution to lichenology.

Degelius devoted his life to lichens, and a lichen also accompanied him to his last home. At the funeral ceremony, a fresh specimen of *Degelia atlantica* (described by Degelius in 1935 as *Parmeliella atlantica*), collected in western Norway and placed on the coffin by Prof. Per Magnus Jørgensen, marked the ending of a unique career. The memory of a great scientist, good friend and gentleman will live for a long time.

Lars Arvidsson

