

David R Hunt, 1938–2019, an appreciation

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We look at the life of an extraordinary botanist and cactus enthusiast. Photos as indicated.

On 20 May 2019 the world of cacti lost one of its most important figures, David Richard Hunt, a Fellow of the BCSS since 1983. At the outset of this appreciation of his life I must put my relationship with David on record for those who may not be aware. When I first met him I cannot exactly recall, but we certainly got to know each other over my university holidays at Easter in 1977, when I volunteered in the Herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, at his invitation making a study of *Mammillaria* seeds under the light microscope over a couple of weeks. While there he introduced me to various colleagues, which was fortuitous, as a few weeks later I was advised to look out for a job advertisement and encouraged to apply, even though I was still some months from graduation. I was selected for interview and offered the job, which turned out to be that of Kew's Horticultural Taxonomist, employed to check the identifications of the Gardens' living collections. I am convinced that, behind-the-scenes, David was instrumental in getting me on board at Kew and in that sense my subsequent career owes him a great deal, not to mention his mentoring that benefitted me over many, many years (and later he was also my boss at Kew, 1986–1994).

I am most grateful to David's widow, Margaret Phillips, the famous concert organist, for checking some of the facts offered below, as I am also to Sara Oldfield, Graham Charles, Roy Mottram, Paul Hoxey, Ray Harley and Noel McGough for additional information and suggestions, since my direct knowledge of David's life begins only with his botanical career and is mainly that relating to cacti. David was born on 25 September 1938, the son of an architect (a borough surveyor), and was

schooled in North London. He went up to Cambridge University in 1956 (graduating in 1959) and had to choose between studying music or botany, but chose the latter, influenced as he told me, by the highly stimulating lectures of E J H Corner FRS (1906–1996), later Professor Corner. Music, however, endured as an important part of David's life and whilst at Cambridge he was a choral scholar, singing in the choir of Gonville & Caius College and later in the Philharmonia Chorus and the Tilford Bach Festival Choir. He was also an organist and was proud to put ARCO (Associate of the Royal College of Organists) after his name.

Like many cactophiles (and succulentophiles), David's interest began as a youngster, at 10 years of age. In his greenhouse collection, which I last saw only a few years ago, there was a venerable specimen of *Parodia leninghausii*, which I believe was a survivor from his youth. His earliest published account of his collection and his worries about its neglect when he was sent off to boarding school and later to university are

wonderfully described in an article published when he was 19 and at Cambridge, entitled 'Thriving on neglect' (*Cact. Succ. J. Gr. Brit.* 20: 56–57, July 1958). From this we learn that David's first cactus was labelled *Cereus silvestrii* (ie *Chamaecereus silvestrii* or nowadays *Echinopsis chamaecereus*), but that, if anything, he had many more mesembs than cacti! David first saw cacti in habitat in 1959, when he travelled with a Cambridge University student expedition to British Honduras, now Belize (Central America). By a strange coincidence, his last personal email message to me, dated 18 December 2018, confirmed the identity of a plant of *Epiphyllum*

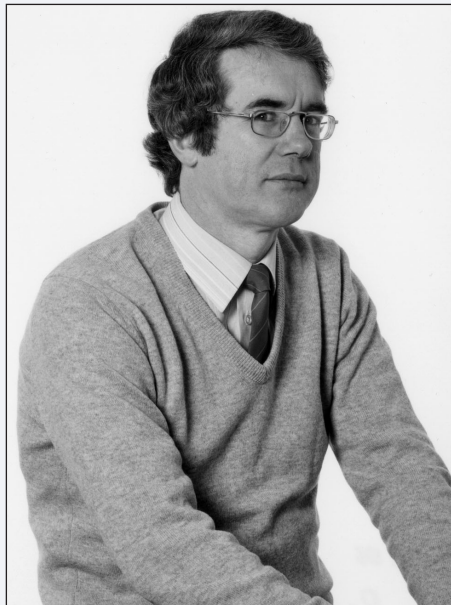


Fig. 1 Official Kew portrait (Copyright: Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)

hookeri subsp. *hookeri*, which had just flowered in Singapore, based on wild specimens he had seen in Belize nearly 60 years before! And, fit as a fiddle, he was still doing fieldwork at 79, this time in the high Andes of Chile in December 2017.

David was appointed to his first position at the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in 1961. In his early years he acted as assistant to N Y Sandwith (1901–1965), an expert on the largely tropical plant family, Bignoniaceae, especially its South American species. David was thus in the Tropical American section of the Kew Herbarium and this resulted in him being asked to make a reconnaissance trip for a Royal Society expedition to Mato Grosso state, Brazil, in 1966, where, after that had concluded, he saw both epiphytic and *caatinga* cacti in the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco. As he rose through the ranks at Kew, David was given new responsibilities, including the creation of the Gardens' first computerised living plant records database, overseeing the systematised conversion of information kept on tens of thousands of index cards into a digital system stored on the Ministry of Agriculture's mainframe computer, at that time a huge machine much less powerful than our modern mobile phones and occupying a building in Guildford, Surrey. Concurrently he was also involved in what was then a rare interdepartmental collaboration at Kew providing advice on the documentation requirements for species stored as seed, a project that would eventually become the Millennium Seed Bank many years later. His interest in cultivated plants soon brought him to the attention of Kew's Director, Sir George Taylor FRS,

who in 1968 appointed him as editor of *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, the world's longest-running coloured periodical on any subject, founded in 1787 and illustrating plants in cultivation, a role he would perform to a very high standard until he relinquished it in 1983. His officially-sanctioned research did not involve cacti at this early stage, but rather the Neotropical relatives of *Tradescantia* in the family Commelinaceae, field studies for which took him to Mexico where, of course, he also encountered many cacti. His doctoral thesis approved by Reading University in 1983 was a study of the Tradescantieae. However, a retired senior colleague, John Hutchinson FRS (1884–1972), was aware of David's interest in cacti and invited him to prepare an account of the troublesome family Cactaceae for the second volume of *The Genera of Flowering Plants* (OUP, 1967). This major publication undoubtedly started a career that would ultimately mark David out as standing shoulder to shoulder with the all-time greats of cactus systematics, including K M Schumann, N L Britton & J N Rose, A Berger and C Backeberg. Although in the hobbyist world most cactus aficionados continued to label their plants with names reflecting the classifications of Britton & Rose and Backeberg, David's 1967 treatment of the family dramatically reversed the 'liberalism' of the earlier authors in recognising far fewer genera than they had. Besides this major overview of the family, David was also becoming active in cactus taxonomy at the species level: in 1969 he published a revision of *Schlumbergera*, the genus of Christmas cacti, in *Kew Bulletin*, and in 1971 a fundamentally important revised infrageneric classification of *Mammillaria*, in the journal of the

Cactus & Succulent Society of Great Britain. This had its origin in a long-running series entitled 'Review of *Mammillaria* names in current usage' begun in 1967 in the *Journal of the Mammillaria Society* and culminated in a 'New Review...' published in *Bradleya*, 1983–1987, and reprinted in book form. I had joined the CSSGB in 1970 and David's arrangement of the many species of *Mammillaria* into subgenera and series fascinated me and undoubtedly was the reason I became a plant



Fig. 2 David (far left) and the Lexicon team in Germany, 2003 (Photo: Graham Charles)

taxonomist as a teenager, organising my living greenhouse collection of its species according to the Hunt system!

During the 1970s David had become increasingly active in both the national and international cactus and succulent worlds. He was a regular contributor to the meetings and journal of the Mammillaria Society, of which he was President 1978–1984, and in 1976 became editor and later treasurer of the CSSGB. In the late 1970s and early 1980s he was one of the principal architects of the merger of the then two main British cactus and succulent societies, the CSSGB and the NCSS, which became the BCSS in 1983 and included the creation of its scientific yearbook, *Bradleya*, founded by David in that year with support from BCSS president, Gordon Rowley. Volume 37 was published in May 2019. At home and abroad, David attended meetings of the International Organization for Succulent Plant Study (IOS); his last publication was the *IOS Bulletin* issued by email on 7 January 2019, reporting on the IOS Congress held in Mexico the previous October. He was an IOS Board member and its Secretary from 1985–1994 and 2007–2019. The IOS also became the vehicle for a process driven by David that would ultimately result in *The New Cactus Lexicon* (2006, 2013). In June 1984, an *ad hoc* Working Party (WP) of the IOS was convened at its congress in Frankfurt, aimed at achieving a consensus amongst cactus specialists as to which genera merited recognition in the post-Backeberg era. Two years later the first of a series of publications reporting the decisions of the WP appeared in a paper in *Bradleya* entitled ‘The genera of the Cactaceae: towards a new

consensus’ (1986). A further WP report was published in 1990 and introduced, at David’s suggestion, a kind of cactus democracy in that the numbers of votes by WP members for, against and abstentions were recorded for each genus recognised or abandoned. Whilst the WP did not include all practising cactus experts, it was certainly a sufficiently representative international body and achieved a consensus that may have represented a minor revolution in the world of plant systematics and systematists. David’s tireless ability to coordinate people and their thinking was essential to the success of this and subsequent like ventures.

The work of the IOS WP had attracted the attention of the then Nomenclature Committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna & Flora (CITES), who desired a checklist of cactus species names with their geographical occurrence to assist the work of scientific authorities and customs officers of member states signatory to this UN convention. For much of the lifetime of this convention David was its main advisor on the taxonomy of cacti, playing a significant role in its effective implementation. Other major projects to which David was contributing, such as *The European Garden Flora* (Vol. 3, 1989) and Kubitzki’s *The Families and Genera of Vascular Plants* (1993), needed treatments of the family at either species or genus level. Thus, David’s compilation of three editions of the *CITES Cactaceae Checklist* (1992, 1999, 2016, the last online), adopted as the global standard reference for all 182 countries party to CITES, brought the assessment of which species to recognise and in which genera into



Fig. 3 John Pilbeam (left) talking to David Hunt, 15 Sep 2002 (Photo: Roy Mottram)

sharper focus and was the start of meetings convened at his countryside home in Milborne Port, Somerset, where David had taken up permanent residence following early retirement from RBG Kew in 1994 (and where, with his wife, Margaret, they founded the English Organ School and Museum in 1996 in the former premises of the United Reformed Church in the village). The attendees at such a meeting in April 1994 are recorded in a photograph on page x of *The New Cactus Lexicon* (NCL) Text volume (2006), where it is indicated that work had begun on NCL, which was then being called the 'IOS Manual of the Cactaceae'. In 1996, to facilitate the communication of planned meetings of the WP and to publish their results, David founded a new 'occasional' bulletin called *Cactaceae Consensus Initiatives*, later retitled as *Cactaceae Systematics Initiatives* (from issue 9, June 2000, to issue 40, the last, in September 2018), the new title reflecting that the IOS WP had been renamed as the International Cactaceae Systematics Group at the IOS congress in Zürich, March 2000. Earlier, in 1994, he had launched a new scientific publication entitled *Succulent Plant Research*, which ran through nine volumes until 2015, catering for larger studies that were too voluminous for *Bradleya* etc. Another periodical published and largely written by David from this time onward was *Mammillaria Postscripts*, later renamed *Huitzilopochtli*, catering for his lifelong interest in that genus.

In 2001, work began in earnest on selecting from many sources the more than 5,000 photographic images of what was hoped would illustrate every taxon recognised in the family for the NCL Atlas volume. This was a period of relatively intense activity, which lasted until 2005, and is remembered fondly by the most regular participants, especially Graham Charles, Martin Lowry, Paul Hoxey, Roy Mottram, John Pilbeam, Mats Hjertson and the author, amongst others. The frequent meetings ran from Friday evenings until Sunday lunchtimes (as some of the participants were gainfully employed elsewhere during weekdays) and were mostly held in the basement of the church's school room, which soon got labelled as 'the cactus bunker'. Meals on Fridays and Saturdays were had in a selection of good local pubs and evening sessions were enhanced by generous libations of red wine often accompanied by Stilton cheese and under the stern and curiously watchful eyes of a portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach. Besides overnight accommodation in the Hunts' spacious property, Margaret

very generously provided breakfasts and Sunday lunches. These are the moments in which some of us have the most poignant memories of David, but they were not without their challenges, as disagreements with him about the taxonomic status of this or that plant were commonplace, though without bloodshed.

NCL was published in 2006 and is undoubtedly David's greatest achievement, while a second edition was almost ready at the time of his passing. It was also fitting that David was honoured with the award of the Cactus d'Or [the Golden Cactus] by Monaco's royalty in 2006. However, we should not forget that his interests were much wider than just cacti and succulents (*Echeveria* was another succulent lifelong favourite). His interest in and knowledge of woody plants, especially conifers, was very significant and he was for many years an active member of the *International Dendrology Society* (IDS), serving on its council. For example, in 1998 he edited and published a symposium volume entitled *Magnolias and their allies* on behalf of the IDS and the Magnolia Society. He also published a book on a tree sanctuary in Sri Lanka (*Dambula*, by F H Popham, 1993) and an *Illustrated guide to the trees of Peru* (2004) by former Kew colleague, Terry Pennington (and others) and *The genus Sloanea in America* (2017) also by Pennington. Besides these, David also published, in 2010 (the International Year of Biodiversity), *A monograph of Cedrela*, by Terry Pennington and Alexandra Muellner, one of the most important tropical American hardwoods. Thus, David was not only a great botanist and plantsman, but also a not insignificant editor and publisher of botanical literature, which he always did *pro bono*; the local print firm, Remous Ltd, in Milborne Port was often busy with David's projects. Dr Sara Oldfield, leader in global tree conservation, has asked me to draw attention to David's important contributions from the 1990s to saving tree species as Vice Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Temperate Broadleaved Trees Specialist Group. He was similarly active in the IUCN-SSC Cactus and Succulent Plants Specialist Group.

David was an inspirational botanist, an independent thinker, *bon viveur* and true friend and mentor to many. He will be missed by former colleagues at Kew, where he was an Honorary Research Fellow following his retirement, and by many others in the wider worlds of plants and music.