

PETER TAYLOR

A Short and Informal Biographical Sketch

By Donald Schnell

“Though there is endless room for observation in the field of nature, which is boundless, yet investigation (where a man endeavors to be sure of his facts) can make but slow progress; and all that one could collect in many years would go into a very narrow compass.”

Gilbert White
from *Natural History of Selborne*
1789

Peter Taylor was born in 1926, and when he was eleven years old, unknown to young Peter of course, a man from Kew named Edgar Milne-Redhead made a collection of species of *Utricularia* in what is now Zambia, and placed them in alcohol rather than make the usual pressed specimens. This was ultimately to steer Taylor's career, but in the meantime as a child, he taught himself botany and entomology and had a great interest in natural history in general. If pressed to name “patron saints” of his interest, he would certainly mention Gilbert White whose 1789 book, Natural History of Selborne was quite available to him. Ultimately, he was to name his first-born son Gilbert in his honor. Another inspiration was the French entomologist Jean Henri Fabre, english translations of whose works were studied by Taylor since he was about thirteen when he borrowed the books from a local library. He now reads his own copies of some of the original French editions to hone his knowledge of the language.

By age 16, World War II had begun in full force and there was work to be done. Taylor found himself in his first job working as an apprentice to the trade of machinist in a five year training program in a factory manufacturing armored cars and military trucks. Towards the end of this period he met a local school teacher who was working on a flora of Taylor's home county. This man later went on to acquire his PhD and to become for years the secretary of the Botanical Society of the British Isles.

Through this man, Peter met a Kew botanist serving in the army at that time, and after the war he was invited to join the Kew staff. Meanwhile, Taylor finished his apprenticeship and won first prize as the best apprentice of the year. But at that moment, he was off in Scotland for a week's unpaid leave to attend a botanical society excursion, quite prophetically.

Taylor botanized the west of England by bicycle and collected his first *Utricularia* specimen, *U. vulgaris*, which was deposited in Kew. In 1948, Peter finally accepted the offer from Kew, and his foreman at the factory upon hearing of his imminent departure offered him an extra penny an hour! Although he would start at a lesser salary at Kew, Taylor had made his decision.

In order to supplement his income, he would do evening work, illustrating, proof reading, etc. This talent as a draughtsman came to the attention of Milne-Redhead and he asked Taylor to make enlarged drawings of those Zambian utricularias collected back in 1937. During this task, Taylor became fascinated by these interesting plants and was encouraged to study them, but largely in his own time evenings, holidays and weekends. Meanwhile, he had a new wife and eventually three children to support and give some attention to, so the road was not easy as Taylor was assigned various tasks in the Kew Herbarium.

His *Utricularia* work proceeded slowly but persistently. In 1954, he named his first species (*U. pentadactyla*), and later that year finished an account of the

Lentibulariaceae for the "Flora of Trinidad and Tobago". For many years in his youth, ferns had been Peter's greatest interest. But a bid to head the fern department at Kew failed, and financial circumstances compelled him to sell his personal herbarium of fern duplicates numbering some 1000 to the New York Botanical Garden, and his fine collection of fern books to the Hunt Library. The die now seemed cast to bladderworts.

Eventually, Peter was named to head the orchid section of the Herbarium at Kew, and continued his work on utricularias in his spare time, or on the side when on orchid field trips to various lands. He refined and promulgated the concept that the best specimens of *Utricularia* were those collected in liquid and eventually accumulated several thousand personally collected specimens deposited in Kew. His early success contributing to regional floras resulted in a flood of requests, some of which are still waiting to be fulfilled. He soon recognized that half the genus was American, so made field trips to South America, and briefly for a few fellowship sponsored months in the United States in 1972 where he stayed in northern Florida, journeying out in a rented car to the field. He visited the Carolinas and the herbaria in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Washington DC and New York.

Now head of the orchid section, he was able to occasionally leave his assistant and heir designate of the section for more botanizing. In 1979 and 1980 on separate occasions, he spent weeks in all the continental states of Australia where he discovered the richest single area of *Utricularia* species diversity in the Northern Territory south and east of Darwin (he saw some 30 species). But the traveling, long hours, tropical climates and general intensity of his work had taken a toll and he returned to Kew in somewhat indifferent health.

But by 1981, he was back in the field in India. A few years before his retirement from Kew in 1986, he was finally permitted to devote his full time to completing what some years before had germinated from his earlier studies, a worldwide monograph on the genus *Utricularia*. Before leaving Kew, he was able to complete all of the now famous Taylor line drawings and much of the text, but two more years—again, his own time—were required to complete the work which appeared in November, 1989, some forty years after beginning his studies of the genus.

Among his awards have been the "Kew Medal" in 1989 for "the high standards he achieved in his work at Kew". In July, 1990, he attended the meeting of the IAPT in Washington DC to receive the prestigious "Engler Medal" for his *Utricularia* monograph.

"Retirement" for Peter Taylor was not to mean a rocking chair in front of a fireplace somewhere. Wisely, and tellingly, he invested in a copying machine and word processor, and moved with his wife to a small woodlot he bought. He describes the woods as depauperate and his work to renovate it, and he is now able to have a steady supply of timber to pursue one of his many hobbies and avocations, woodworking. He even built a small sawmill and sometimes cuts as much as 500 board feet of timber. The lumber must dry, of course, and sometimes the season does not cooperate, so it dries often scattered in the house where his very patient and loving wife puts up with it, as well as his woodworking projects seemingly going first to friends and others asking for them. He has also been able to see or collect almost half of the British butterfly fauna on his own property, some 25 species.

Meanwhile, he is still writing about utricularias. He just completed the genus section for Flora Australia, and as you can see in this issue of CPN, completed quite a bit of work for us.

In the Preface to his monograph on the genus *Utricularia*, Taylor writes: "In the long course of the preparation of this work I may have lost only a small amount of blood, but I have certainly lost a lot of sleep, shed much sweat and not a few tears. However, it has given me an enormous amount of satisfaction and pleasure." A job very well done; and from all of us—Thanks, Peter!