Biography of John Alexander Reid

John Reid was born at Newcastle-on-Tyne, N.E. England, on 4 October 1915. His father was with the army in France. His earliest memories are of a house at Milford on the south coast of England where there were red squirrels (long since replaced by greys) in the pine trees and a pond in the garden with water skaters shown him by his uncle Cecil. These so fascinated him that he often fell in. Surely a precocious interest in entomology?

In 1920 the family moved to Gerrards Cross, from where his father commuted to London, as John and his younger brother Tony were to do when they reached college age. In April 1924 he went to boarding school in Sussex where wildlife, including butterflies, abounded. He became an ardent lepidopterist, and his mother used to be given strict instructions how to feed his caterpillars when he returned to school each autumn. He was indignant when uncle Cecil teasingly called his Oak Eggar moths "poached eggers."

In September 1929 he went to Blundells in Devon. At neither school did he distinguish himself scholastically or at games, though he became a useful runner and rifle shot. After a dismal period at a crammers he matriculated and entered Imperial College (London University) in October 1934. Once launched on biology he flourished and got a First with prize in July 1938. Alas there were no jobs, but he was given a valuable postgraduate year under 0. W. Richards and successfully tackled a number of research problems (74-82).

In July 1939 he was offered what he had hoped for in 1938, a scholarship at the School of Tropical Agriculture, Trinidad, which would have led to a post in agricultural entomology in the colonies. But at the same interview he was offered a two year research studentship at the Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur, Federated Malay States (the IMR), to investigate "naturalistic" methods for the control of rural malaria. As war was obviously coming and the Malayan post paid a handsome £700 p.a., he chose Malaya and sailed on 17 November.

After blacked-out Britain, the voyage was an introduction to a different world. Dressing for dinner every night (men bound for Bombay wore white jackets and black trousers, those for Calcutta black jackets and white trousers), going ashore at exciting places - Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said, Aden, Bombay and Colombo. In Kuala Lumpur he was instructed in the niceties of signing the book at Government House, and leaving visiting cards with the wives of selected Senior Officers. He was quartered in a batchelor mess, an old deep-verandahed building with "thunder box" sanitation and Shanghai jars for bathing.

On reporting for duty he was told to go and buy a car. He had passed his driving test some two years before after eight lessons and had never driven before or since. He chose a small Austen, declining the salesman's first suggestion of a large Dodge, and they went for a trial run. When the salesman handed over the wheel he was terrified. By the time they got back to the garage so was the salesman!

There followed two years of intensely interesting work under the guidance of E. P. Hodgkin. He had to acquire a lot of local knowledge about malaria and its control in Malaya, before he could tackle trials of "naturalistic methods." Meantime Hodgkin pointed out two taxonomic problems. In 1938 Dr. R. Crawford, encouraged by B. A. R. Gater, had published a remarkable study of the pupae of 15 species of Malayan Anopheles, and had found 5 different types of hyrcanus pupae. The problem was to differentiate these 5 pupal types as adults. In 1934 carrying malaria in a part of Kuala Lumpur. The Hodgkin had found "hyrcanus" second problem concerned An. barbirostris, a widespread common species considered harmless, but found by Hodgkin to be an important malaria carrier in a few restricted areas. He tackled these problems with enthusiasm and by the end of 1940 had recognized Crawford's 5 hyrcanus pupal types plus two more, and had differentiated the adults and identified one as the probable vector. He had also found two forms of $An.\ barbirostris$, one of which was restricted to the areas where Hodgkin had found infections (1), and two new forms of An. umbrosus. These discoveries were the beginning of his special interest in sibling species groups and were to take more than 20 years to work out and publish.

After the days work there was golf, swimming, running with the Hash House Harriers and drill with the F. M. S. Volunteers.

On 1 October 1941 the Army formed No. 6 Malaria Field Laboratory and took Dr. J. H. Strahan (malaria) and John from the IMR to be respectivly C.O., and Entomologist of the unit. October and November were spent in surveys around camps in the north of Malaya near the border of Siam. By December No. 6 MFL was surveying camps in the south when the Japanese bombed Singapore during the night of the 8th. Soon after, the unit moved from the IMR to Professor Gater's laboratory in the College of Medicine, Singapore. The unique anopheline collection, built up by Gater and then Hodgkin, was sent there and survived in the college basement with all of John's notes. The culicine collection, left in the IMR, was taken by the Japanese.

Singapore fell on 15 February 1942 and 3 1/2 years of imprisonment began. The hardships endured by the P.O.W.'s and internees in the Far East have been vividly described by many writers and only a few personal recollections follow: dysentery and fly epidemics during the early days in Changi P.O.W. camp which was grossly overcrowded and without water or electricity; long hungry tramps outside the perimeter wire on anopheline larval surveys; scrounging anything edible, like coconuts found on the way; localized epedemics of malaria and dengue. All these kept No. 6 MFL busy in field and laboratory, but as organization improved there was free time in the afternoons. John was one of a small group that took up botany, using Corner's "Wayside Trees of Malaya." Thus began in interest in botany which has been a source of pleasure ever since.

By late 1942 Changi numbers had been much reduced as parties were sent overseas or up country. The first to go were those of the rank of full colonel and above who were shipped to Japan. Like later parties, they were medically examined before going. The examination included rectal swabs, taken by khakicapped Japanese orderlies dressed in white coats, face masks and rubber boots.

They prodded the men with a short wooden rod which was then rubbed over an agar plate. This procedure, performed in public, was known as "bum stabbing." Ronald Searle drew a hilarious cartoon of the "Brass Hats" suffering this indignity which was passed around the camp.

In April 1943 Tom Wilson (formerly Health Officer, Malacca) and John went from No. 6 MFL with the ill-fated "F" force, sent to work on the Siam-Burma railway. They returned with the remnants of the force in December. Those eight months were a period of great hardship, beginning with a three week march of 180 miles by night over a jungle track through monsoon rain to reach their camps. Twelve months after setting out 3087 of the original 7000 were dead, killed by a combination of starvation, physical exhaustion and disease (35, 83).

The return of the malaria-saturated "F" force to Changi coincided with an upsurge of An. sundaicus, caused by construction of an airfield in the nearby mangroves, and a malaria epidemic followed which kept No. 6 MFL busy in lab and field.

On 18 May 1944 John had his appendix out. General peritonitis followed and he was seven months in the hospital. While there, with the aid of a hand lens he made drawings of grasses brought to him by his botanical friends. Eight years later these formed the basis of a short article (85).

Japan surrendered on 1 September 1945, and John got home on 12 October. By June 1946 he had recovered from an abdominal repair operation, got reappointed to the IMR, gained an MSc on published work, and been granted study leave to examine anopheline types, etc. He worked in London (meeting Ken Knight at the British Museum), Amsterdam, Leiden, Paris and Oxford (2,3).

Hodgkin had resigned in 1945 to join his family in Australia where they had spent the war. So on Reid's return to Kuala Lumpur in February 1947 he became head of the entomology division which included a new field laboratory 65 miles south at Tampin. Here Dr. J. W. Field and John Strahan were planning trials of the new drugs and insecticides for the control of rural malaria, the job for which he had originally been recruited when there was nothing but the chimera of "naturalistic measures" to pit against the problem. Strahan was resident in Tampin, John had to shuttle back and forth until, with Hodgkin's help, he was exceedingly fortunate to get R. H. Wharton from Australia. Harry arrived in June 1948, just after the communist terrorist emergency had begun, and took over entomology in Tampin.

There followed more than ten years of absorbing and fruitful work as part of a happy team, working first on rural malaria and then on filariasis (56, 58). When Field became Director IMR and Strahan moved to the new university in Singapore, Tom Wilson (then Health Officer, Kedah) replaced Field and John F. B. Edeson replaced Strahan. Wharton and Edeson did wonderful work on malaria at Tampin, and then on filariasis at Kuantan on the east coast, with Wilson and Reid visiting regularly.

There was seldom time for systematics, except on Sunday mornings when he had his laboratory to himself. In 1947 an urgent task was to test antimalarial oils, as the oil companies gradually got production back to normal (40). On one occasion, aggrieved members of a big company whose tender for "Malariol" had not been accepted, descended on him brandishing a sample and hinting that he had been got at by the successful company. He said a silent prayer for help, and taking a sample of the successful oil (a high spreading one with 20% of DDT) poured a little gently into a test tube half full of water. The oil floated on the top. The proffered sample, poured into a second tube, ran down to the bottom. The complainants left quietly.

In 1948 a team from the U. S. Army came to test chloromycetin against scrubtyphus, invited by the Director IMR, Dr. Lewthwaite, who supplied "volunteers," including John who was in the control group receiving a placebo. He duly got scrub-typhus, after sitting for days in mite-infested areas, and was treated with chloromycetin - more than once due to relapses.

In 1951 he went home to Teignmouth in Devon and met Nonie Morrison - before she got mumps! They married during his second leave on 12 November 1955. During this 1951 leave he learned fly-fishing for trout from his father, and they spent happy hours together on the Teign and Bovey. During study leave he visited institutes in the United Kingdom, read a paper at the 9th international congress on entomology in Amsterdam (45), and visited E. Africa and Mauritius.

By 1952 the U. S. Army unit at the IMR had isolated viruses, including Japanese B encephalitis, from culicine mosquitoes. Identification of culicines was difficult, especially as the Japanese had taken the collection. Also, at this time there was concern over the risk of yellow fever reaching Asia, and an Aedes aegypti survey was called for (49). Another entomologist was urgently needed. Fortunately Prof. P. A. Buxton found W. W. Macdonald who arrived in October 1953. Bill Macdonald was well established by the time a conference on Yellow Fever and other mosquito-borne viruses was held at the Institute in February 1954, chaired by Buxton. Following this John visited Japan in March at the invitation of the U. S. Army to discuss Japanese Encephalitis, and went to Nagasaki and Fukuoka to discuss An. "hyreamus" with Japanese workers (6).

During the 1950's WHO's concern with global malaria erradication involved him and his staff in a great deal of work. In September 1953 he and John Edeson attended the first WHO Asian malaria conference in Bangkok, Paul Russell being chairman. WHO seemed unhappy with the firm Malayan report that house-spraying did not stop transmission there.

Following Wharton's discovery at Tampin in 1949 of the outdoor day resting places of An. maculatus and the relatively high percentage with human blood compared to the accompanying non-vector anophelines, his methods were used in 1951 for the vector species on the Selangor coast, An. sundaicus and campestris (then called dark-winged barbirostris). This led to the exciting discovery that An. hackeri and pujutensis of the leucosphyrus group were feeding on monkeys and carried sporozoites, presumably simian (65). This was proved in detail by Eyles, Wharton and colleagues.

After marriage he dropped Sunday morning taxonomy in favour of jungle walks with Nonie and the Malayan Nature Society of which she was secretary and he, later, president. The endless variety of plants and animals in the forest was a source of delight that induced feelings of wonder and reverence, sometimes obliquely expressed in print (84-90).

In January 1956 he got his DSc. In 1957 Malaya became independant, and in December 1958 he was made a JMN for public service. In 1959 he and Nonie made plans to leave Malaya, and he got a grant from Rockefeller for 1960 to work at the British Museum on a book on the S. E. Asian anophelines. Also in 1959 he acted for two months as Director IMR and helped obtain the appointment of W. H. Cheong as the first Malaysian entomologist at the IMR, where he still heads a large and active division.

In June 1960, having refused an invitation to stay on as Director IMR, he left, and Harry Wharton became senior entomologist. In September they settled in London and he began work on the book. The task, originally expected to take 2-3 years, stretched out to eight. Much more revisional work was needed than had been foreseen (10, 14, 16-19) and he was getting slower. But Peter Mattingly, Mick Gillies and the late David Lewis were stimulating friends. After three years the Rockefeller grants were replaced by others from Wellcome, but at last, in December 1968 the book was published (20).

In 1963 John and Nonie bought a house in the country at Dorking. by this time their fathers were dead and they tried to be of help to their mothers and three spinster aunts, which kept them busy for several years. During this period of work on the book, 1963-68, he sometimes experienced a feeling that he was receiving help from beyond himself.

After the book, he was unwell. Later he resumed work at the Museum part time (24-31, 69), and in 1977 was elected an Honorary Associate, but in 1981 ceased working there. At present Dr. Reid works around Dorking on biological records for the National Trust and Surrey county, and curates the collections at Juniper Hall Field Centre.

Jim Kitzmiller's book of 1982 on anopheline names, with its dedication to him, gave great pleasure, as did, even more, sharing the John Belkin award for 1986 with Elizabeth (Pat) Marks, thanks to Bruce Harrison's sponsorship.

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