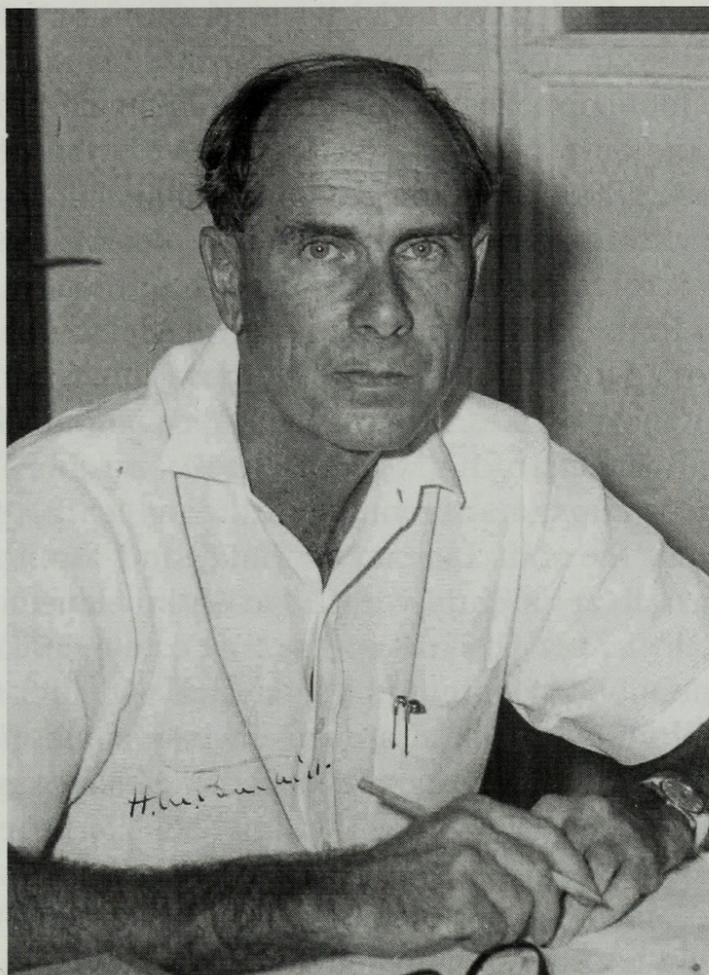


OBITUARY

Humphrey Morrison Burkill O.B.E., F.L.S. (1914–2006)



The career and achievements of Humphrey Burkill, who died recently aged 92, parallel those of his father, Isaac Henry Burkill, to a remarkable degree. Both went to Repton School and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, both served as Director of Singapore Botanic Gardens and both authored monumental works on the economic botany of large tropical regions. While the direct or indirect influence of his father may have set Humphrey off in his footsteps fate seems to have conspired to keep him returning to the same track. Presumably even his longevity owed much to his parents' staying power.

However, father and son were of very different generations. Burkill senior was very much of the Colonial Age. He served in British India and Malaya at a time when empire was unquestioned. Burkill junior was a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II and served as Director of Singapore Botanic Gardens up to and after independence.

Humphrey Burkill's parents were first cousins and his mother, Ethel Maud Morrison, was 40 when he was born in the Director's House, now Burkill Hall, in Singapore Botanic Gardens. Humphrey was an only child, and like most children of senior colonial officers he was soon shipped back to Britain. At four years old he was 'farmed out' to the family of an impoverished vicar in Yorkshire. At eight he was sent to preparatory school where a fellow pupil was one Tommy Disher, nephew to Richmal Crompton and the model for 'Just William'. At thirteen Humphrey went to Repton, followed by Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he read Natural Sciences like his father did before him. Humphrey, by his own admission, was more interested in shooting than science when at University and represented both Cambridge and England at the sport. On graduation in 1936, after flirting with the idea of becoming a policeman, he got a job with Dunlop Malayan Estates. Thus he returned to South-East Asia where he was to spend the bulk of his working life. As a rubber planter, Burkill had to study plantation management including learning the languages needed to organise the staff. Fluency in Malay and Tamil was expected of planters and Burkill, apparently with a facility for languages, also picked up Telugu as many of the workers on his first estate spoke that language. Burkill's adeptness with a rifle and experience with the Officer Training Corps at university made it natural for him to join the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force. The Japanese invasion of Malaya saw the immediate mobilisation of the force and Burkill was part of the retreat to Singapore where he was seconded to the Royal Engineers. Singapore soon fell and like most captured servicemen he was imprisoned in Changi. After six months he was sent, along with many others, to labour camps in Thailand. Burkill reminisced about the activities of the wood-party he worked on during his imprisonment in an article written for the newsletter of a prisoners of war association. Their job was to collect the wood cut in the countryside around the camp, mostly carrying the cut lengths of wood and stacking it in the barges that transported it down river. Burkill's linguistic abilities again came in useful. The Thai he had learned before the war allowed communication with the villagers and illicit trading when the guards were not looking. Skin problems in later life doubtless stemmed from the exposure to the sun during the forced labour.

After the war Burkill returned to work with Dunlops in Malaya; this time with Joan Bloomer, his new wife. In 1948 Burkill joined the staff of the Rubber Research Institute and took on the supervision of the experimental rubber plantings throughout the Malay Peninsula. In 1954 Burkill was offered the post of Assistant Director at Singapore Botanic Gardens by then Director M.R. Henderson. To some extent this was a question of

returning a favour to the Burkills. I.H. Burkill had helped Henderson in 1923 by offering him a job in Singapore when his post in Kuala Lumpur was discontinued. H.M. Burkill thought it likely a similar fate awaited him at RRI due to funding uncertainties. After Henderson's retirement Burkill became Acting Director then in 1957 Director of the Gardens.

It had become clear that times were changing and the end of the colonial era was in sight. Burkill was to oversee the change from a largely expatriate British staff of administrators and researchers to one of appropriately qualified locals. People with potential were identified and sent for training. Chew Wee Lek and Chang Khiaw Lan completed Ph.D.s under the supervision of former Assistant Director of the Botanic Gardens, Prof. E.J.H. Corner in Cambridge. Burkill continued in the post of director after Singapore became part of Malaysia and the subsequent expulsion of Singapore from the federation and its own independence. He finally retired in mid-1969. In those final years he tried hard to promote the idea of continuing Singapore Botanic Gardens as a centre for scientific research as well as a beautiful and historic garden. Burkill's administrative burden left him little time for research, and unlike his predecessors as Director such as H.N. Ridley, his father or R.E. Holttum he published little original research while working in Singapore. He had an interest in seaweeds and did go on many collecting trips, particularly to the small islands around Singapore and up the east coast of the Peninsula.

Burkill retired to England in late 1969. Looking for something to do, he was offered work at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew on a project to revise *Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa*. This was written by J.M. Dalziel and published in 1937. Despite all his tropical experience being in South-East Asia, Burkill took up the job and for eight years was employed on what proved to be an enormous task. This included a long trip to Nigeria in 1973. I.H. Burkill is probably best known in botanical circles for his *Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula* and it must have seen fitting to his son to also produce a magnum opus on economic botany. The painstaking work compiling information from published material and herbarium specimens continued long after Humphrey retired. Working as an Honorary Research Fellow at Kew, he brought the six volumes covering 5300 species to publication between 1985 and 2004. A masterly work of great scholarship, it will undoubtedly serve as the pre-eminent source of information on West African economic botany for decades to come, much as his father's dictionary has done for South-East Asia. Humphrey Burkill certainly followed the model of his predecessors as Director of Singapore Botanic Gardens in having a long and very productive retirement.

Humphrey's commitment to the *Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa* left no time for the study of his seaweed collections from his Singapore days. They were deposited in the algal herbarium at the Natural History Museum in London.

In relation to South-East Asian botany, H.M. Burkill will be remembered for his long service (1957—1969) as Director of Singapore Botanic Gardens and his efforts to maintain the scientific traditions of such institutions through the transition from colony to independent state. Burkill made the case for continuing government support for the Gardens and their research functions at the highest levels. A newly independent nation had many important items on its agenda for change and the Botanic Gardens was not among them. Far-sightedly parks and street planting were given priority in what was to become the 'Garden City' policy and in the long-term the Botanic Gardens was to prosper as a flagship under that policy. But in the short-term the Gardens became something of a backwater in the civil service and resources were limited, potentially threatening the continued existence of the herbarium and other research facilities. Fortunately the Gardens did come through relatively intact, and Humphrey Burkill will be remembered for his commitment to the concept of Botanic Gardens as scientific institutions, particularly to the one in which he was born.

Mrs Joan Burkill died two years before her husband. Humphrey and Joan are survived by their son and daughter, both of whom have followed in the Burkill tradition of professional involvement in biology.

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