

CONSETT DAVIS: SCIENTIST, SOLDIER, KIMBERLEY COLLECTOR AND CASUALTY OF WAR

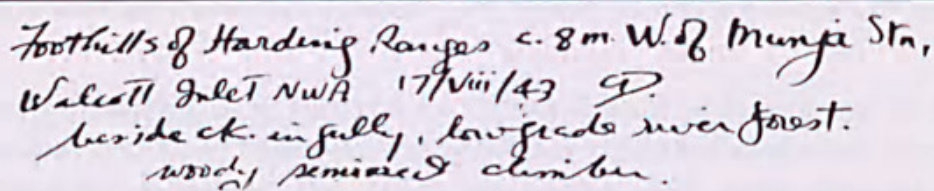
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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the contribution to science of Dr Harrold Fosbery Consett Davis with particular reference to his collecting activities in the Kimberley of Western Australia during 1943.

Consett Davis had an outstanding academic record and appeared destined for great things. In 1943 he contemplated applying for the chair of biology at the University of Western Australia. Although effectively in a "reserved occupation", Consett Davis enlisted and was posted to an army guerilla unit operating in the Kimberley in 1943. His role was to identify edible plants and he used the opportunity to make scientific collections of both plants and animals. Although determined to see active service, Consett Davis' military career was curtailed when he was persuaded to go to New Guinea as a biologist with the Tropical Scientific Service to study the disease, scrub typhus. On 11 November 1944, at the age of 31, he was killed in a plane crash in New Guinea.

During the identification of plants from the Walcott Inlet survey in the remote north west Kimberley (see Kenneally & Edinger-this publication) a number of specimens from this locality were found in the Western Australian Herbarium with handwritten labels dated 1943 and signed "CD" (Fig. 1). On the herbarium sheet label the collector was given as "Consett Davis". Who was Consett Davis and what was he doing in the Walcott Inlet area in 1943 - a time during World War Two when the Japanese had bombed Derby and Broome, and most civilians and Aboriginal communities had been evacuated from remote Kimberley areas, for security reasons.



Foothills of Harding Ranges c. 8 m. W. of Munja Stn,
Walcott Inlet NWA 17/VIII/43 CD.
beside ck. in gully, low grade river forest.
woody semierect climber.

Figure 1. An example of a handwritten label (slightly reduced) of Consett Davis accompanying a specimen of *Opilia amentacea* Roxb. (Opiliaceae) in the Western Australian Herbarium (PERTH). The label reads "Foothills of Harding Ranges c. 8 m. W. of Munja Stn, Walcott Inlet NWA 17/viii/43 CD. beside ck. in gully, lowgrade river forest. woody semierect climber.

So began a search of the Western Australian Herbarium records and archives to discover the background to an outstanding biologist whose scientific career was cut short by his untimely death, in 1944, aged 31, whilst on military service in New Guinea.



Figure 2. H.F. Consett Davis photographed "somewhere in N.W.Australia" whilst serving with the Guerilla Warfare Group in the Kimberley.

Harrold Fosbery Consett Davis (Fig. 2) was born in Sydney on 23rd June 1913 and was educated at The King's School, Parramatta, and then attended the University of Sydney. His academic performance was outstanding, and he graduated with First Class Honours in Zoology (entomology) in 1934 and First Class Honours in Botany (plant ecology) in 1935. In 1937 he was awarded a Master of Science to be followed in 1943 by a Doctor of Science degree (both in zoology).

During 1937-39 he was Linnean-Macleay Fellow in Zoology of the Linnean Society of New South Wales, conducting research in plant ecology at the same time. During the latter part of 1938 and early 1939, with leave-of-absence, he travelled to the U.S.A., England and France where he visited various universities and museums. In 1939 he was appointed foundation lecturer in biology at what was then New England University College, Armidale, subsequently the University of New England. During this period he published papers in various journals, of which 34 were entomological and five were on plant ecology.

In 1934 Consett Davis joined the Citizen Air Force and, in due course, graduated and was commissioned as a pilot officer. He was then placed on the Air Force Reserve.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 he was already on the staff of the New England University College and, therefore, in a "reserved occupation". Although he could not be called-up, he insisted on enlisting in the RAAF in September 1940. This caused great embarrassment on all sides and, after two months at Richmond Air Base, where he spent his time teaching himself Japanese, he was discharged on the grounds that as he had not flown for several years he needed a refresher course, which was not available.

Consett Davis returned to academic life in anything but a chastened frame of mind! In November 1941, he enlisted again, this time in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and, to ensure that history did not repeat itself, gave his occupation as "labourer". Although the University could have had him discharged at any time, they wisely decided to let him "play soldiers" to get the military out of his system while at the same time ensuring that his attempts to get overseas in a combat unit would be frustrated. Thus, from a mechanised Cavalry Squadron, he was sent as an instructor in tactics to the Armoured Fighting Vehicles School at Puckapunyal, Victoria, then to the 2/7 Australian Division Cavalry Regiment and the Guerilla Warfare Group.

By 1943 concern was mounting over the possibility of a Japanese invasion of the Australian mainland. It occurred belatedly to some of those responsible for defence that, if the Japanese came at all, they might not "knock on the front door", but land undetected on some unguarded and thinly populated shore. A lot of possibilities existed, but the Kimberley area was thought to be particularly vulnerable when it was realised that the only reliable charts and maps of the area were made by the Japanese under the guise of pearling activities over many years. Not only that, but they had omitted the courtesy of providing Canberra with copies. So, after the usual delay for "high level discussions", the 3rd Australian Corps, Guerrilla Warfare Group was formed in 1943, and Consett Davis transferred to this from a Mechanised Cavalry Squadron. The idea was that this group should remedy all defence omissions of the past and, at the same time, live off the land. Consett Davis' botanical knowledge was supposed to enable him to identify edible plants. According to his wife Gwenda Davis: "No one was poisoned. Perhaps they wisely avoided a vegetarian diet."

The Guerilla Warfare Unit was posted to the Kimberley, arriving first in Perth where Consett Davis visited Charles Gardner, the Western Australian Government Botanist. Travelling north by road, Consett Davis began

collecting specimens. As well as plants, he collected shells and insects which went to the Australian Museum, Sydney. The plants he sent to New England University were destroyed by fire in 1958. From the herbarium labels and archival correspondence held at the Western Australian Herbarium it can be ascertained that he was on the Pardoo - Wallal road (behind the Eighty Mile Beach) on 27 May 1943, at Fossil Downs Station 20 June 1943, Lower Liveringa on Fitzroy River on 26 June 1943, Yulleroo Well on Broome - Derby road on 29 June 1943, Munja Station, Walcott Inlet on 17 August 1943 and the Isdell River on 26 August 1943.

My wife will be writing shortly
about the Brachycome material.

Meanwhile could you collect
local fruiting specimens, not
poisoned as we wish to grow the
seed? Have you any chance also
of getting material from Esperance,
Labill.'s type locality?

Hope there are some specimens of use
to you in the lot I send; must
apologise again for the condition.

Let's know of any developments
in the local chain of biology).

Yours sincerely
Consett Davis

Figure 3. Sample of Consett Davis' handwriting and signature from his letter to C.A. Gardner dated 27th October 1943.

On 27 October 1943 Consett Davis despatched two parcels of Kimberley specimens to Charles Gardner. An accompanying letter (Fig. 3) told Gardner: "keep whatever you want". The letter also alluded to the taxonomic research on *Brachycome* (Asteraceae) jointly being undertaken with his wife Gwenda and his own interest in applying for the Chair of Biology at the University of Western Australia. Gwenda Davis has confirmed that her husband: "was interested in applying for the Chair of Biology and had left a rough application with me, to be expanded and submitted on his behalf should the occasion arise when he was not able to do so himself".

"as from

New England University College
Armidale N.S.W

27/x/43

Dear Mr Gardner

My wife has sent off by registered fragile post the two boxes of specimens constituting all I collected (reg. nos. 4003-4004). When you have time to examine them, keep whatever you want, return what you can (identified if possible), and, where keeping all of a lot, return at any rate the label plus name.

There are nearly 250 lots or single specimens, some very fragmentary through rigours of field conditions, some broken by lack of proper presses plus the extra dry climate, some damaged in transit. I find that Dr. Rodway has retained no material. His determinations (in pencil on the labels) are only very rough, on first examination from Bentham's Flora. I included them on the slips for purposes of checking your corrected identifications with my written notes on food plants etc., where Dr. Rodway's names are used.

I enclose a fragment from Fossil Downs, Margaret R. [River]; the natives use this as Tobacco. It looks like *Isotoma fluviatilis*.

Hope you can get help from station or mission people, now I've come away, to collect more stuff; if requiring names of possible collectors write to me. Bill Macdonald of Fossil Downs is a good bet. If Harold Reid of Munja doesn't come across with the giant *Blechnum*, try his stockman, Fred Spinks, same address - he'd get it for you himself for a bottle of plonk.

The field notes and crate arrived safely.

My wife will be writing shortly about the *Brachycome* material. Meanwhile could you collect local fruiting specimens, not poisoned

as we wish to grow the seed? Have you any chance also of getting material from Esperance, Labill's [Labillardiere's] type locality?

Hope there are some specimens of use to you in the lot I sent; must apologise again for the condition.

Let's know of any developments in the local Chair (of Biology).

Yours sincerely

Consett Davis"

Charles Gardner replied to Consett Davis's letter on 12 November and acknowledged receipt of the specimens.

"12th. November, 1943.

Consett Davis Esq.,
New England University College
ARMIDALE. New South Wales.

Dear Mr. Davis,

I returned from the country yesterday to find your letter of the 27th. October, and the two parcels of specimens from the North. I am looking forward to delving into these very shortly as time permits, but with the work of the Flora on my hands, the progress must necessarily be rather slow, - depending on the condition of the specimens. The enclosed leaves, much broken in transit, which were enclosed in your letter, may be *Isotoma fluviatilis*, which is not recorded from Western Australia, and I do not think that I can do anything with this damaged fragment. Your other specimens are in quite good order, but will require very careful working through because of the paucity of the flowering material in some cases.

I will return duplicates of practically everything, together with your labels as you request.

Yesterday I received a letter from Dr. Rodway, and in replying I told him that I had not heard from you. Your letter turned up later on.

I shall be on the look out for *Brachycome* seeds for you, and I collected what appear to be two species on the south coast recently. I shall send these shortly.

Regarding your last paragraph, I shall not fail to keep you informed of any developments in the local Biology Department of the University. I understand that the present holder of the position is to remain until the end of the war.

Yours sincerely,

(C.A. Gardner)

GOVERNMENT BOTANIST

P.S. Will send determinations from time to time."

The letter referred to from Dr F.A. Rodway was written on the 30 October 1943. Dr Rodway was Consett-Davis' father-in-law and son of Leonard Rodway (1853-1936), a Tasmanian dentist and honorary Government Botanist. The letter indicates that Rodway was also sent specimens by Consett Davis (but Consett Davis indicates in his letter of 27 October 1943 "I find that Dr Rodway has retained no material").

"THE CORNER,
NOWRA

30 Oct/43

Dear Mr Gardner

My daughter tells me that her husband - Consett Davis has called on you, & that you told him you have specimens gathered by me in the Herbarium.

These would be some I collected when medical officer at Mt Malcolm, nearly 40 years ago.

Sad, is it not, how the years fly by & one gets old and decrepit?

In your *Enumeratio*, there is a *Gunniopsis* (*G. Rodwayi*) listed on p. 42. This would have been sent to my late father, Leonard Rodway of Hobart, and he apparently referred it to Ewart.

I have quite a number of W.A. plants in my Herbarium, mostly from Monlinup, East of Albany, that were sent me by my other daughter when living there, ten years ago.

Consett has also sent me some from "somewhere up North".

I am looking forward to seeing your new Flora of W.A. This will be a valuable work, as it will complete the series of State Floras.

Yrs sincerely

F.A. Rodway"

Gardner replied to Rodway's letter on 12 November 1943.

"12th. November, 1943

Dr. F.A. Rodway,
The Corner,
NOWRA, N.S.WALES

Dear Dr. Rodway,

I was delighted to receive your letter of the 30th. October, and to hear from Mr. Consett Davis that you still take a keen interest in botany. Your name is most familiar to me from the excellent collections in the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. I am afraid that we have very few of your specimens in this herbarium, probably because there was no herbarium here when you were collecting at Coolgardie and Malcolm. *Gunniopsis rodwayi* (Ewart) C.A. Gardn. was collected at Malcolm.

I am nearing completion of volume I of the Flora. I expect that there will be eight volumes altogether. Volume I deals with the families Cycadaceae to Amarantaceae (*sic.*), the Monocotyledons are being left until the completion of the Dicotyledons, for obvious reasons.

I have received from Mrs. Consett Davis, two large parcels of specimens from Kimberley. The diagnoses will take some considerable time, but I will send along determinations and duplicates from time to time. I have received no letter yet from Mrs. Davis.

Yours sincerely,

(C.A. Gardner)
GOVERNMENT BOTANIST"

On the 4th September 1944 Gardner wrote to Consett Davis to advise him that he had made little progress in identifying his plant collections from the Kimberley.

"4th. September, 1944

Mr. Consett Davis,
143 Mossman Street,
ARMIDALE,
NEW SOUTH WALES.

Dear Mr. Davis,

You must be wondering how I am getting on with your material from Kimberley. Just as I was about to commence on the parcels, I was sent up to Kimberley myself, and made a very large collection along the Fitzroy and Ord Rivers. More than half of this has now been determined, and I hope before long to get yours finished. I am kept so busy, however, that you will have to wait for some time yet.

In passing through some of the stations I heard of your visits there, especially from Liveringa, where it was said that you had collected more than one species of *Nymphaea*.

Mrs. Davis has written two letters asking for material of *Brachycome*. During my absence in the north, specimens were sent of a species from near Esperance, but I understand that the one you require was not represented. Esperance is, as you know, a long way from Perth, but an opportunity might occur next month of getting further specimens to the west of Esperance, and I will look out for any *Brachycome* I come across.

Yours sincerely,

C. A. Gardner
GOVERNMENT BOTANIST"

The Guerilla Warfare group did not last for long as it became apparent to the authorities that their task was impossible. At the end of 1943, it was dissolved and became the 43rd Water Transport Operating Company, Landing Craft (Royal Australian Engineers), and, all personnel returned to the east. Consett Davis was posted to an Officer Cadet Training Unit in South Australia, from which he emerged as a lieutenant. There was,

however, still no immediate prospect of an overseas posting and Consett Davis was becoming increasingly disgusted.

Consett Davis now was coming under heavy pressure to leave the AIF and join the Tropical Scientific Service as a biologist. This, he refused to do but, after further and heavier pressure, a compromise was reached whereby he was discharged as NX73645 and re-enlisted as NX203938 with continuity of service and the rank of lieutenant. He was seconded to the Scientific Liaison Bureau, while remaining on the Active List as an AIF officer.

He left for New Guinea in July 1944 and immediately became involved in pioneer work on scrub typhus, which was causing serious casualties among both army and airforce personnel stationed there. In the course of this work, he visited many areas and on one such trip on 11 November 1944, the aircraft failed to clear a nearby mountain on take-off and all on board were killed. He is buried in the military cemetery at Lae. He was survived by his wife Gwenda, two daughters and one son. According to his wife "He did wonder about the origin of the name "Walcott Inlet", because his great-great-grandfather was the eighteenth century naturalist John Walcott". However, there is no connection as the name commemorates Pemberton Walcott, a collector of natural history specimens and inspector of pearl fisheries at Broome.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Kenneally, Kevin F. 1993. "Consett Davis: Scientist, Soldier, Kimberley Collector and Casualty of War." *The Western Australian Naturalist* 19(2), 74–83.

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