

OBITUARY

NORMAN DENBIGH RILEY (1890-1979)

On the 25th of May 1979, there passed away in his 89th year, one of the best-known figures in the world of Entomology. For the name of N. D. Riley was known wherever butterflies were studied, as well as not least for his long association with the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, which lasted for well over half a century.

Born on the 20th of September 1890, he was brought up at Balham in south-west London, where he found that his next-door neighbour was none other than the celebrated lepidopterist Richard South. Riley recounts how as a small boy of nine he used to be invited round to see the collections, and occasionally had the great privilege of accompanying the famous naturalist on some expedition. This was where the spark was lit that began the lifelong interest in butterflies and moths. After being educated at Dulwich College from 1904 to 1909, Riley received his first introduction to the Natural History Museum, it is generally believed, through South. He became demonstrator to the eminent naturalist, Sir Ray Lancaster, its Director, and two years later in 1911, a vacancy appeared on the Museum staff to which he was appointed. This was the start of a remarkable career and eventual tenure of office there. But when the first world war came in 1914, he joined the Army Service Corps and went out to France, being appointed Supply Officer to a cavalry brigade. Later, as Captain, he was transferred to the Queen's Royal West Sussex Regiment. It was after the war that his main flow of literature began, which continued without a break for the next fifty years, first when Dr. Gahan was Keeper of Entomology, and later under his successor Major E. E. Austen, at whose behest a complete census of all the insects was undertaken in 1931. Riley, who became Keeper in 1932, inherited no less than a population of nearly eight million individuals comprising 279,000 species and 21 Orders of insects. It is difficult to compute the present population of insects in the entomological department nearly half a century later, especially after the huge accessions under his excellent keepership extending over a span of near 23 years. For it was in 1937 that the second Lord Rothschild died, leaving his immense collection of lepidoptera to the Museum at South Kensington, and the whole Museum in which it was housed in Tring also became part of the national heritage. In 1939, the onset of the second world war saw the removal of a large portion of the insect collection to the West Country, while during the next six years the Museum survived many hazards, not least when a flying bomb fell just in front of it in Cromwell Road, damaging some of the insect collection in the south-west basement wing, and with some of the staff there having narrow escapes. In 1952, the collection of insects was transferred to a newly-built wing, where it now occupies five floors. Included in it is the

Rothschild-Cockayne-Kettlewell collection, by far the biggest *ensemble* of British lepidoptera, which Riley helped to inaugurate in 1948. So that when he retired from being Keeper in 1955, to be succeeded by Dr. W. B. China, through his wise and shrewd judgment and under his able administration, he left by far the largest assemblage of insects under one roof in any part of the world, and the most renowned of collections visited and studied by experts everywhere.

During his time at the Museum covering over 60 years, his output of literature was remarkable, with a complete record of just over 400 items. The first of these appeared in 1913 in the *Entomologist*, which magazine he took over from Richard South in 1923, and became its editor (with the exception of a short break in 1952-53) for the next 36 years till 1959, when it was probably the best known journal of its kind in the world, until it ceased publication in 1973. Naturally most of his contributions found their way into the *Entomologist*, including obituaries of 44 eminent entomologists. He had a great aptitude for writing obituaries, the first of which seems to have been on Fruhstorfer in 1922, followed by that on Charles Oberthür in 1924. In 1937 he extolled the qualities of the redoubtable Lord Rothschild, and after the war, those of the great Karl Jordan, who died in 1959 at the age of 97, and finally Francis Hemming in 1964. But the versatility of his pen was very wide, mainly where descriptions of butterflies were concerned. In 1923, he wrote up the butterflies brought back from the 1921 Mount Everest expedition, in the *Transactions of the Entomological Society of London*, to which he also contributed freely over the years, as well as papers in the publications of the Natural History Museum. As already mentioned, the output of these papers and notes continued without a break right through the 1939-45 war and well into the 1960's on a great variety of subjects, including conservation and innumerable observations in the field. All his accounts and descriptions of a large number of new species were carried out with the same care and attention to detail, but chiefly on superficial features of the insects. The microscope and other scientific aids do not seem to have played a part in any of this work, and apparently he never undertook any major monograph on any special group of butterflies.

It was in the middle 1960's that Dr. Lionel Higgins mentioned to Riley, that no comprehensive book had been written on the butterflies of Europe since the great work of Lang in 1884. It was decided to compile an up-to-date new book easily readable and not too bulky, and thus the birth of *A Field Guide to the Butterflies of Britain and Europe* was initiated. This eventually appeared in 1970, beautifully illustrated by Brian Hargreaves and was at once a best-seller, with editions in no less than eight foreign languages. But not content with being a co-author in this excellent work which has become a sort of "bible" to continental students of butterflies, in 1975 he published another field guide under his own pen,

entitled *The Butterflies of the West Indies*, which remains as a fine monument to his memory and industry.

For one with such wide interests in entomology, it is not surprising that he should have been associated with important positions both at home and abroad. He attended most of the International Congresses of Entomology between the wars, and the five held after 1945, at Stockholm (1948), Amsterdam (1951), Montreal (1956), Vienna (1960) culminating with that held in London in 1964. In 1948 he became Permanent Secretary to these Congresses, and did invaluable work in helping to organise them. He also, in 1950, became one of the chief commissioners on the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature, a post he held with distinction till 1965. All this work in so many spheres of entomology was recognised in 1952 by the honour of the award of the C.B.E.

Naturally many societies numbered Riley as one of their most eminent and staunchest members. For he joined the Entomological Society of London in 1912, became its Secretary from 1926 till 1929, and again occupied this position, after being Treasurer 1939-1940, for ten years from 1941 to 1951, was President in 1951 and 1952 and became a Life Fellow in 1959. He was for many years too, a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and of the Suffolk Natural History Society. But it was perhaps the South London Entomological and Natural History Society (now the British Entomological and Natural History Society) which was dearest to his heart. This body he joined as far back as 1908, when such "giants" as J. W. Tutt, H. Rowland-Brown and G. H. Verrall were still very much alive. He was by far its oldest and most distinguished active member, becoming its President in 1923 and 1924, and seldom missed attending its Annual Exhibition each autumn. He was elected an Honorary member of this Society in 1959.

In 1912, he attended his first Verrall Supper, which suppers were inaugurated to carry on the tradition of its celebrated founder, G. H. Verrall, who began them in 1887. From that date it is doubtful if he ever missed being at one of these annual assemblages of entomologists in general, who until 1952 used to meet in the old Holborn Restaurant, with the modest number of about a hundred. By the time he made his last attendance at this function in 1978, where it is now held in the large refectory of Imperial College, the figure had grown to over three-hundred. The success of these gatherings was very much due to the efforts of Norman Riley, who undertook the organisation of them soon after the end of the last war, and only relinquished this task quite recently when ill-health began to overtake him. These gatherings were latterly much sponsored by the Entomological Club, the oldest body of its kind, with its members presiding each year at the Verrall Supper, including Norman Riley who had been associated with the Club for many years.

In the running of this notable annual occasion, as with many others of his activities, he was helped throughout by

Edith Riley, who was a great support to him during their near 60 years of married life. Almost every year used to see Norman and Edith in some part of Europe, always armed with a net. Though he never made a personal collection, he always deposited the fruits of the chase in the Museum. Only in 1970, apart from attending the Congresses, did he venture to Africa when he visited Uganda just before the onset of the Amin régime. He was a great *raconteur* with a fine sense of humour, especially in matters entomological. These included many anecdotes. One such delightful incident he used to recount, took place many years ago in the Pyrenees when he was collecting with one of the Adkin family. The wives were sitting down watching operations when a French couple came along. The young woman enquired what the two men were doing with their nets, to which came the answer "They appear to be catching butterflies". "But they look quite intelligent" came the disarming reply.

The amusement he derived from this episode typifies the happy and cheerful outlook Norman Riley had on most aspects of life. He admired frankness and high integrity of character, and was a staunch and good friend to all who gained his confidence. A very popular and well-loved figure has gone from our midst, the like of whom we may not see for a very long time. All who had the privilege of knowing him must wish to express their sympathy to his widow and other members of his family extending to the fourth generation. — C. G. M. DE W.

Notes and Observations

NOTES ON, AND THE APPARENT EXTINCTION OF, THE CHALK-HILL BLUE: *LYSANDRA CORIDON* L. IN LINCOLNSHIRE. — On the day when the paper and wireless contrived together to tell us that the Large Blue was extinct in England, Mr. Les. Hare came to see us. I think the sad news may have spurred him, but he had other sad news, which, alas, I could confirm. *Lysandra coridon* seems to have disappeared from its small habitat north of Grantham. He had been there early in August: I had been there late in August. Our friends had been in between, but all without avail. The N.C. notice of the Nature Conservancy does not seem to have been effective. We think the foodplant has been ousted. But we look back on the days when *coridon* flew there. I remembered taking two specimens, which I sent to the Museum at Tring. He had other memories, for Les is a photographer of no mean talent.

It was, he said, a sunny August — mid-August — day a few years back when he and his wife set out to observe *coridon* flying on the narrow strip of grass, about three metres wide and about half a kilometre long, that lines the left side of the hill as one goes up it to where the road forks. There are some small trees and growth in about the middle, but we usually like the top stretch. Mrs. Hare sat in her deck chair near the car reading, while Les went to see the oviposition by *coridon*



Worms, C. G. M. de. 1980. "Obituary. Norman Denbigh Riley (1890-1979)." *The entomologist's record and journal of variation* 92, 19-22.

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