

REMEMBERING WARREN H. WAGNER, JR. (1911-2000)

Walter L. Meagher

The Orchards, Hopcraft Lane,
Deddington, Oxon. OX15 0TD,
England.

Dr. Wagner was the lab instructor in Botany 101; Dr. Jones was the lecturer. Lab was more interesting, there were microscopes to use, *Chlamydomonas* to see, and gametophytes to confound with sporophytes. Dr. Wagner was a man in motion, with a strong but not a tall build, leaning forward, like a linebacker, and rejoicing in the scrum of knowledge. What thrilled me was that at the end of the term he asked me if I would like to be his lab assistant the next autumn. And get paid!

I discovered I knew the style of Dr. Wagner before I met him, having had Dr. Edgar T. Wherry (1885-1982) as my teacher at the Barnes Foundation Horticultural School, in Merion, PA. I was a freshman in high school when I attended his classes. Wherry made no concession to age; he merely assumed everyone who attended a lecture was eager to hear what he had to say, just as later, under the tutelage of Dr. Wagner, I learned that his commanding enthusiasm for his subject - and life - left no room for indifference among any member of his audience.

That I was invited to be Dr. Wagner's lab assistant seemed to me the height of generosity, but this was his nature, to take students up, to bring them forward, to sit on their doctoral committees, to open doors to their future as professional botanists. He was convinced there could be no higher calling than botany; I believe it is to meet such a man, to fall under his influence, even if for only a time, that the great universities have been established.

It was a highlight of my pre-college botanizing years to go on a field trip, sponsored by the Philadelphia Academy of Science, to the Pine Barrens and cedar swamps of central New Jersey, with Dr. Wherry. There were mosquitoes and wet feet, hardships which seemed to Dr. Wherry, as I would find they seemed, in a different place, to Dr.

Wagner, the occasion of stoicism. Wherry had a mission, as dedicated field botanists do. He was in search of a small nondescript rare fern which he knew to grow in the cedar swamp.

It was not a class, as it would be when Dr. Wagner took his Systematic Botany students to a quaking bog in Michigan; on both occasions, on the bog with Wagner and in the cedar swamp with Wherry, the 'students' were strung out, trying vainly to keep their feet dry. Both men had concluded long ago not to care about wet feet. No more would they care about perilous cliffs, where a rare fern might grow. The message was clear: Dedication must be 100%, and Botany is not for sissies.

HERE IT IS! Dr. Wherry exclaimed: *Schizea pusilla*.

What does one learn from such an experience? I raise the point because Wagner had been Wherry's student at the University of Pennsylvania when Penn was strong in Botany, and when Botany was yet whole and undivided. One understood that *Schizea* had no market value; that it was hardly worth finding unless you were committed to an unfashionable metaphysic; if you were, then you were one of the blessed for whom knowledge is inherently good and wonderful.

Dr. Wagner loved the quaking bog. It was the highlight of the term in Systematic Botany. It was in that class I met Ed Voss, Dr. Wagner's lab assistant who, because he was not yet a Ph.D., was 'Ed'. Since then, of course, he has achieved all the fame of his honorific. The text book was Fernald's edition of Gray's *Manual of Botany*, not a book to read, even though it is as long as War and Peace; not a book with passages to memorize, as in other classes, but a book to use in learning how to key unknowns. Keying is a skill one learns for life, and Gray's *Manual* was the Rosetta Stone of taxonomic botany.

Wagner and Voss were as different as men can be and yet harmonious, like the oboe playing with a cello. The bog was more than a site of rare plants; it was the equivalent of a paleontologist's journey to the Devonian Age. I forget the species, but I remember Dr. Wagner's delight in walking across the quaking surface, the threat and danger it posed, giving an edge to the afternoon, what Bertrand Russell called the

moral equivalent of war. I then remembered Wherry in the cedar swamp! The style of the three botanists is a meme (coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976).

Let us leave Dr. Wagner for a moment and return to Dr. Wherry. He did something else when he bent down, his tall frame curved in mid-body, like a crane. His sight was failing, but not his hearing. He knew by ear what we wouldn't have known by sight. Eyes fully focused on *Schizea*, as if his head were the optics of a microscope lowered over the body of a specimen, he threw up his right arm with a finger pointing skyward, and shouted: Prothonatary Warbler! We were startled into realizing the man was a naturalist. That is a broader and older division of interest in what had become the biological sciences. I saw a similar breadth of interest in Dr. Wagner, who had taught himself the names and behavioral patterns of butterflies, as if it were inappropriate to belong to only one department in the university of natural history.

I left the University of Michigan in 1957, and didn't see Dr. Wagner again until the summer of 1998 in the dining room of the University of Michigan Biological Station (Douglas Lake, near Pellston). In my own mind, I had not deserted Botany, for I had been a college publisher, and originated the botany textbook by Peter Raven. I had gone to UMBS to take the short course in field botany offered by Dr. Voss. He was called Ed, for by that time the use of honorifics had diminished, but the memes had not changed. Suddenly a man hurtled to me across the dining hall, embraced me, smiling broadly, clapped me on the back and said: 'Meagher (he always pronounced my name in the Irish way, 'Mahr'), I always knew you would be a botanist!'

An excellent obit extolling the man's life and contribution to Botany was presented by D. R. Farrer (*Taxon* 49: 585-592).



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