

OBITUARY

ALEXANDER DONALD ABBOT RUSSWURM
1904–2001

Alexander Donald Abbot Russwurm was born in Guildford, Surrey, on the 11 June 1904, the eldest of three children. To avoid potential confusion arising from the long standing family tradition of naming first sons Alexander, he was known as Donald, or Don. The origin of the very unusual surname is mentioned in a fascinating family history dating back to around 1720 and Virginia, America. It is thought to be Scandinavian, circa 1200 in the form of Ruzwurm, although sometimes spelt Rossworm and Rosworm. The English branch of the family was established by Don's grandfather.

Don was born into an Edwardian age of great interest in the natural world; indeed, his relatives included the 19th century ornithologist and naturalist Reverend Canon Atkinson, author of several popular books on various natural history topics, and Edward L. Atkinson, surgeon and parasitologist on Captain Robert Scott's fateful Antarctic expedition that began in 1910.

Don's interest in butterflies started about the age of twelve when his father showed him how to set them on an improvised setting-board made from two matchboxes. A copy of Richard South's *Butterflies of the British Isles* from his parents one Christmas became a treasured possession. His father was an accomplished artist and encouraged his children accordingly, although regrettably, circumstances prevented him living to see the rewards of his efforts. For besides Don's achievements, his sister Gaye also went on to be successful, with her work accepted by the Royal Academy. The proximity of their home in Leighton Buzzard to the London and North Western railway line was instrumental in the development of another of Don's life-time interests: steam locomotives and railways.

The family summer holidays were spent at Selsey, in Sussex, staying at their converted seaside railway carriage (later mistakenly destroyed in an arson attack by the suffragette movement—their intended target being a similar one owned by the Liberal MP Charles Masterman). There, armed with his net, Don would take himself off collecting, out towards the peaceful solitude of Church Norton, overlooking Pagham Harbour.

Completing his schooling in Bletchley and Dunstable, he left at sixteen to join the Eastern Telegraph Company as a trainee submarine cable telegraphist. After qualifying, he was posted abroad to their cable station at Carcavellos, in Portugal, where he was delighted to find many of the migrant butterflies rare to Britain, in abundance. The station had its own golf course and tennis courts and he soon became quite a proficient player. Postings to Marseille, Alexandria, and Suez followed, with the end of his first five-year term overseas completed in Aden, where his health was affected by the oppressive climate and poor diet. On his way back to England an insect bite on his leg turned septic, resulting in him having to spend a large part of his six months' leave convalescing.

His final tour of duty saw him return to Suez before going on to Zanzibar, a posting he enjoyed tremendously. With less work, ample opportunity to indulge in tennis and collecting, this tropical island was a paradise, although ironically, the first butterfly he caught proved to be nothing more exotic than a Painted Lady, *Cynthia cardui* (L.). Later on, he was fortunate to witness the dazzling spectacle of a mass immigration of the beautiful day-flying moth *Chrysiridia croesus* Gerstaecker.

He returned to England in 1932, to work at the company's London head office in Moorgate. With less free time to collect, he pursued his other interests of oil painting (apart from his father's tuition, he was self-taught), model railways and classical music. At the outbreak of war he opted to work night duty at considerable personal risk from the continual bombing raids: the first flying bomb to strike London in June 1944 fell close by, just as he was coming off duty one morning. The shift pattern suited collecting and so he continued with it until his retirement in 1959.

Don neither drove nor owned a car. After he retired to the New Forest, a bicycle met most of his collecting needs and there was never a shortage of friends to take him on trips further afield. His interest in aberrations extended to all species and this was reflected in the breadth of varieties in his collection. The Chalk Hill Blue, *Lysandra coridon* (Poda) (after which he named his Brockenhurst home), was a particular favourite and he enjoyed some of the last good seasons for it at Portland, Dorset, including those of 1975 and 1976, when his efforts were rewarded with a boardful of varieties including a female ab. *ultraradiata* B. & L. Although well past its heyday, the New Forest produced some fine captures for him including: ab. *oblitterae* Robson & Gardner of the White Admiral, *Limenitis camilla* (L.); ab. *semiichnusoides* Pronin of the Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglais urticae* (L.); and several melanic forms in the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria selene* (D. & S.), and the Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria euphrosyne* (L.). His garden also proved lucky, with a Comma, *Polygonia c-album* (L.) ab. *obscura* Closs; and in the remarkable 'cardui' year of 1996, an ab. *ocellata* Rebel was taken there by his collecting companion Mark Middleton. Many of their captures are featured in *South's British Butterflies*, *Aberrations of British Butterflies*, and *Variation in British Butterflies*.

Despite his advancing years, Don continued to enjoy remarkably good health. A hip replacement operation at the age of seventy-six was only a temporary set-back to his collecting. He was in his eighties when mobility problems finally curtailed his field-work. He then derived immense pleasure from his successful temperature experiments on the Nymphalidae, guided by his friend Karl Bailey.

Don's career as a butterfly illustrator began rather by chance. Regularly exhibiting at the company's private art exhibitions, his work had been noticed by a colleague who informed him that the publishers of the magazine *Nature Lover* required an artist. With his interest in collecting recently rekindled by the marvellous migrant years after the war (he took eight Pale Clouded Yellow, *Colias hyale* (L.) in September 1947 at Seaford, Sussex), his season's captures formed the basis of the illustrated articles he began contributing to the magazine in 1948. His first book illustrations appeared in 1947 in Captain Bernard Acworth's *Butterfly Miracles and Mysteries*.

His skill and reputation for painting aberrations steadily increased. In 1968 he was commissioned to paint the adult stages for Graham Howarth's *South's British Butterflies*, having been recommended for the job by Richard Ford. Don's own book *Aberrations of British Butterflies* was published in 1978. In between he undertook numerous private commissions including one for myself—later to be reproduced in our joint collaboration *Variation in British Butterflies*, which also included his biography and featured many examples of his work over the years. The launch of the book was held on his ninety-sixth birthday.

Don joined what was then the 'South London' in 1952, and only a few weeks before his death, was made a Special Life Member. A regular exhibitor at the annual exhibitions, he was often called upon to select specimens for the exhibition photograph. Although he contributed a few articles to the entomological journals, his illustrations appeared more often.

He never received the financial recognition his work truly deserved. Success, however, comes in many guises. In addition to the two aberrations dedicated to him (Clouded Buff, *Diacrisia sannio* Hübner ab. *russwurmi* Watson, and the Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus* (Geoffroy) ab. *russwurmi* Harmer), he has bestowed upon entomology a wonderful legacy through his books, illustrations and the many lepidopterists he inspired with his infectious enthusiasm for aberrations.

He was a benign, generous and good-natured person. Notwithstanding his many splendid captures, he always enthused over the good fortune of others in the field. If he could help them acquire a particular insect he would willingly do so, whether by way of a locality, access to his moth trap, or inviting them to make Coridon their collecting pied-à-terre. I well remember his kindness and generosity when we first met in 1971. With the wide age difference between us, the only thing we seemed to have in common was our mutual interest in butterflies—yet from this developed a long-lasting friendship. He was extremely polite and although appearing rather self-conscious at times (never more so than when being photographed), he was jovial and relaxed enough in familiar company. He had a gentle and cheerful sense of humour and a fund of entomological anecdotes. Despite receiving at least one proposal of marriage in his earlier days, he chose to remain single: he could recite too many instances where matrimony had come between fellow collectors and the pursuit of their hobby, often with the same predictable, unfortunate outcome.

With Mark Middleton later going to live at Coridon, Don was able to enjoy over forty years of idyllic retirement there, immersed in his interests. Despite arthritis in his hands and failing eyesight, he continued painting well into his nineties, concentrating on producing his own personalised Christmas cards. Only in the last year or so of his life did his age catch up with him. It was hoped that a cataract operation in early 2001 would restore some of his lost vision but it did not bring about any noticeable improvement—those eyes that had served him so faithfully for nearly a century were all but worn out. Gradually his overall state of health declined and, after a brief illness, he passed away peacefully on the 15 December.

In accordance with Don's wishes his funeral service was conducted by his friend and fellow member of our Society the Reverend Steve Pittis and his ashes interred at Church Norton, where his mother, elder sister and his cousin the distinguished dramatist Robert Cedric Sherriff, who wrote *Journey's End*, are buried. In paying tribute to one of the most eminent British butterfly artists of the last century, Karl Bailey said of Don: 'He left this world without ever having made an enemy.' I don't think anyone fortunate to have known A. D. A. Russwurm would disagree.

We extend our sympathy to Gaye in her sad loss, and I am deeply indebted to her for all the help she has given me here.

ALEC S. HARMER

I first met Donald at Bob Watson's home in Boldre, in the New Forest, in 1964. As we chatted, it was not long before he suggested that we should collect together. Prior to this I had only collected moths and did not know the best butterfly localities. Later on, I readily agreed to his suggestion that, having decided to leave his collection to me, we should amalgamate our efforts, thus avoiding taking too many typical specimens. In 1967 we decided to go further afield so we travelled up to Arnside, Westmorland, to take the Scotch Argus, *Erebia aethiops aethiops* (Esper). We found this species so rewarding that we decided to spend another holiday at the same place, this time installing a moth trap at the hotel. We also spent two holidays



Fig. 1. A. D. A. Russwurm (1904–2001). New Forest, June 1971. Photo: ©Alec S. Harmer.

in pursuit of the Large Heath *Coenonympha tullia davus* (Fabricius), also with the same excellent results. We later went with Bob Watson to Ben Lawers, Perthshire, and obtained a varied series of the Small Mountain Ringlet, *Erebia epiphron scotica* Cooke.

In 1966 I was away from home for six weeks and asked Donald if he would run my moth trap in his garden. He was keen to do this, and when I got back I found that he had captured a number of species which did not occur at my home in Boldre, so I asked him if I could install a trap permanently in his garden. He readily agreed and I wrote to Watkins & Doncaster ordering one to be delivered to his home. The late Richard Ford delivered it himself as for some time he had wanted to visit Donald, and it was this visit that led to him illustrating the new 'South'. Over the years Donald's captures included several male ab. *albescens* Tutt of the Privet Hawk-moth, *Sphinx ligustri* L., and two notable migrants: the Striped Hawk-moth, *Hyles lineata livornica* Esper; and the Slender Burnished Brass, *Diachrysia orichalcea* Fabricius.

When my mother went into a rest home, her house was sold, so I moved in with Donald. It worked well enough, though a little cramped. His life was full of interest, and apart from butterflies, he was a fan of a variety of sports and interested in railways and photography. His greatest love, though, was classical music. He will be sadly missed by his very large circle of friends.

H. G. MARK MIDDLETON

I first met Donald in March 1968 when he visited me at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington to discuss the selection of the specimens to be figured in the then 'new' edition of 'South', which I had been given the task of writing. Following that initial meeting we corresponded and met frequently during the next three years. There was a great deal of work and discussion involved over the specimens concerned as they were very widely scattered, some being at South Kensington, some at Tring and some in private collections. The sheer logistics involved were intriguing and time consuming.

I was always—and still am—amazed at how quickly and accurately Donald painted his beloved aberrations and his fund of knowledge concerning their data. He was fundamentally a rather shy man (one could not imagine him ever 'cocking a snook' at authority), exceedingly kind and generous and made many collecting friends. His exquisite brushwork was greatly appreciated by them and he would gladly paint an excellent likeness of an extreme variety for the lucky person who had the good fortune to capture it. He figured many of these in his own book *Aberrations of British Butterflies*.

Apart from his absorbing interest in British Lepidoptera, he had a great love and encyclopaedic knowledge of classical music. He eventually replaced all of his large collection of long playing records with compact discs. He adored Wagnerian opera and, when he was living near London, made visits to Covent Garden and other venues. His other great interests were steam locomotives, cricket and lawn tennis (only the men's game). When he came to stay with us in Arkley, we would sometimes go to a concert. And, in later years, when he was confined to his wheelchair, I would visit him and Mark Middleton fortnightly at Coridon. The time went exceedingly rapidly and I often drove back home in the early hours, having had lengthy discussions concerning the specimens in their joint collections.

As a generous friend and expert entomological artist he will be greatly missed.

GRAHAM HOWARTH

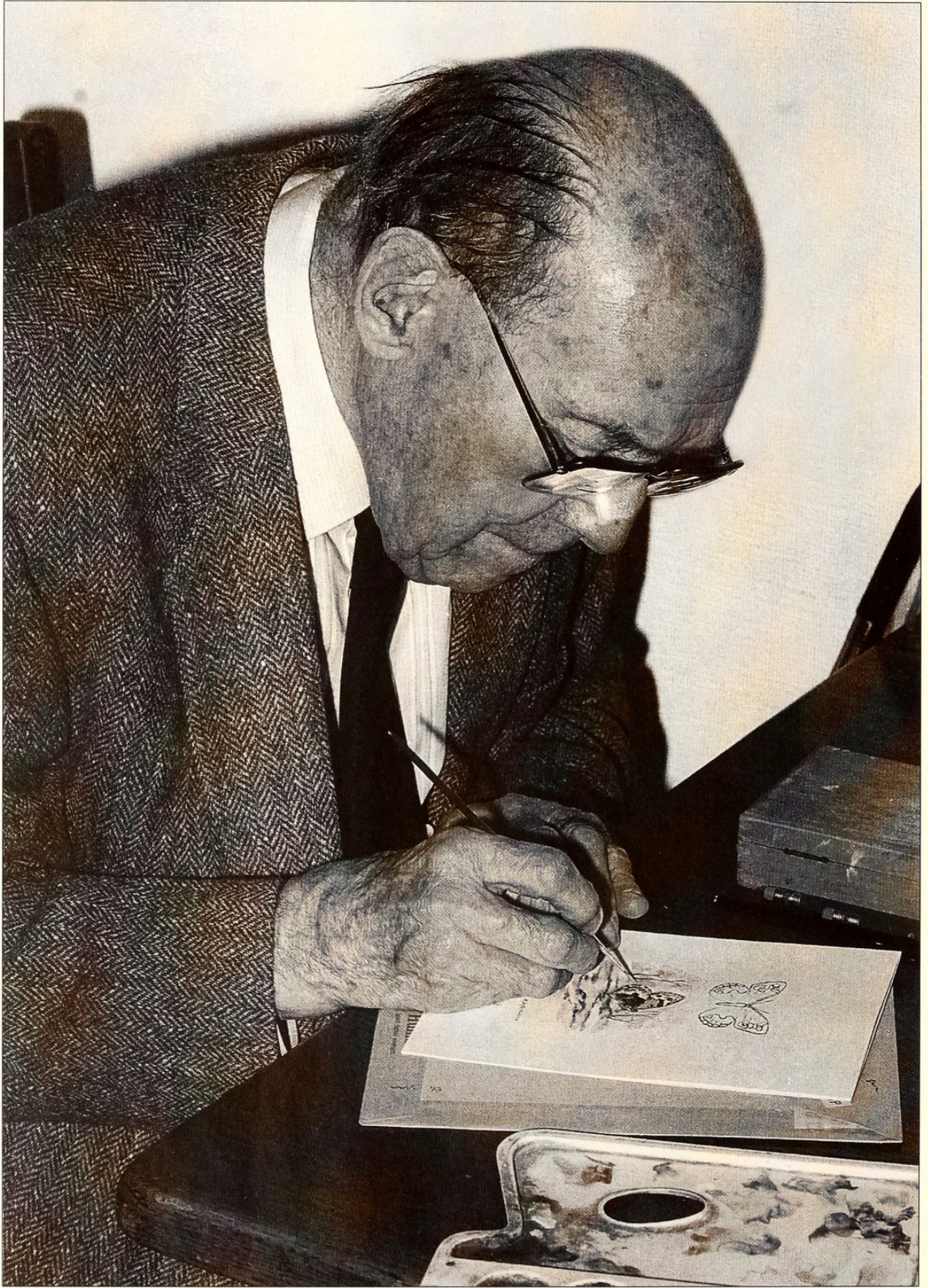


Fig. 2. A. D. A. Russwurm working on his 1994 Christmas card. October 1994.
Photo: ©Alec S. Harmer.

Donald was a sensitive man who had spent his working life in an occupation which he did not find congenial; on retirement he found his haven and solace in the New Forest among his beloved butterflies. He was too shy to make friends readily, but in and around the Forest he found other nature-lovers and neighbours with whom he enjoyed mixing.

He loved classical music and was forever tinkering with his 'gramophone' equipment, continually trying to improve the quality of sound. Much of his time was also spent in depicting butterflies, their varieties and aberrations, in watercolour and, despite his reticence, he quickly became known for the fidelity and beauty of these 'portraits' and as a natural successor to F. W. Frohawk.

I first got to know him well when he came to see me with forty beautiful plates and the text of a projected book. He was crestfallen and unhappy and told me that the Publications Department of the British Museum (Natural History) (now the Natural History Museum) had had it in hand for some months with a view to publishing it, but that it had just been returned to him with a brief note saying that they had decided against it. He asked if E. W. Classey Ltd. would publish it and, although I felt sure that the BM(NH) would have done a better job, I agreed. It was thus that *Aberrations of British Butterflies* saw the light of day in 1978.

In later life a great blow fell on him: arthritis in his hands and failing eyesight gradually affected his painting ability. Despite this however, he continued to send to a few of his friends (of whom I was fortunate to be one) hand painted Christmas cards. December 2000 brought the last card from Donald and it was of a colour photograph of an earlier painting of *Vanessa cardui* (L.); it must have cost him dear to thus admit defeat—but he was indomitable and would not let his friends down.

I was proud to have known Donald: quiet, shy, reliable, knowledgeable, gifted and staunch . . . I could think of several other epithets, all of praise and all true.

ERIC W. CLASSEY

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