

Obituary

## John Colhoun (1913–2002): cryptogamist and plant pathologist

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John Colhoun, Professor Emeritus at the University of Manchester, President of the British Mycological Society in 1963, died in 2002 aged 88 years.

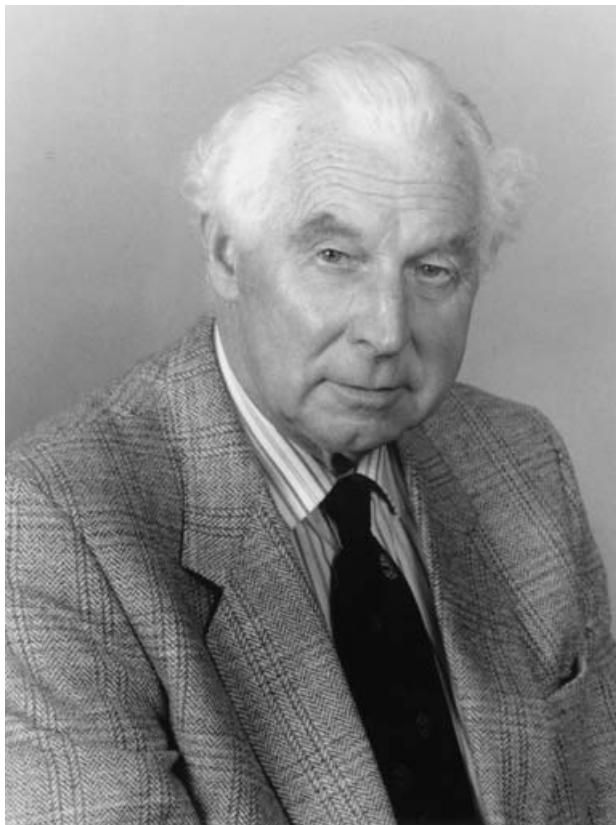


Fig. 1. John Colhoun (1913–2002).

John was born at Castlederg, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland, on 15 May 1913 into a farming family. While it may have been assumed that he would also become a farmer, his approach to agriculture became academic, taking a botany degree in 1933 followed by first class honours in agricultural botany in 1934 at Queen's

University, Belfast. His interest in plant pathology began to develop leading to an MAgr in mycology and plant pathology, also at Queen's, in 1937. Taking up research assistantships at Queen's and with the Ministry of Agriculture for Northern Ireland, he began research at Imperial College, University of London, on the nutrition of fungal pathogens of apples, leading to the award of a PhD in 1940. He returned to Belfast to take up Assistant Lectureships at Queen's, initially in agricultural botany and subsequently in mycology and plant pathology. During 1940, working in collaboration with A. E. Muskett, his interest moved from diseases of apples to those of flax, an important crop in the province during World War II. Many publications on diseases of flax were produced through the 1940s, leading to a definitive text (Muskett & Colhoun 1947). He then turned to club-root of brassicas in the 1950s, leading to a significant monograph (Colhoun 1958a) and the award of a readership in 1954. In his early years in Belfast, John also took plant pathology to a wider audience, with frequent appearances on Northern Ireland Radio for the province's version of Gardener's Question Time.

John had other roles at the university, including Warden of Queen's Chambers hall of residence from 1942–49, and for many years was Esquire Bedell (with duties including mace-bearer) and an Honorary Gardenmaster of Queen's. He was also popular with students, becoming President of various undergraduate societies including the Motor Club. This was because he drove around Belfast in a vintage Chambers motor car, the last of a rare make, of local manufacture, and now in the Belfast Transport Museum. While he was not particularly interested in the mechanics of the car, its fine upholstery, curtains, and silver-plated flower vases were more in tune with his lifelong interest

in antiques. He shared this interest with his wife, Margaret, after their marriage in 1949.

In 1960, the Colhoun family, which now included three daughters, moved to north Cheshire, when John was appointed to the Chair of Cryptogamic Botany at the University of Manchester. He quickly began the expansion of both teaching and research in plant pathology, which he included under the ‘cryptogamic’ banner, as had his predecessor Claude Wardlaw. Three young plant pathologists were appointed to lecturing posts within a short time, a mycologist, a bacteriologist, and even a plant virologist, something of an innovation in undergraduate teaching. Research laboratories were expanded at the main University site and at the Botany Experimental Grounds at Fallowfield, where dedicated insect-proof glasshouses were built. Extensive use was also made of the field facilities at the Experimental Grounds at Jodrell Bank in Cheshire. Students and staff benefited from the close relationships that John maintained with personnel in research stations and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food’s Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS), and exchange visits provided invaluable contact with those genuinely working ‘in the field’.

In Manchester John’s plant pathological interests ranged from fusaria and phytophthoras to *Septoria* and *Phoma*, including hosts from cereals to chrysanthemum, yam, oil palm, and banana. Much of this work also involved the guidance of research students, as some of the readers of this appreciation will recall, with fond memories of the anecdotes and jokes interspersed with sound scientific advice. During his tenure, under his supervision or that of his colleagues, over 70 postgraduates from the UK and overseas were trained in plant pathology. Many others were inspired as undergraduates to pursue plant pathology research in other laboratories. John also ensured that other aspects of ‘cryptogams’ were well-represented in the undergraduate botany course.

John’s admirable qualities led to his selection for senior posts at Manchester University, serving as Dean of the Faculty of Science from 1974 to 1976 and as Pro-Vice Chancellor from 1977 to 1980, both of these roles giving scope for his skills as an unbiased but persuasive administrator. His expertise was also valued outside the University, having been appointed to several committees of the Agricultural Research Council, including membership of the Research Policy Committee from 1973 to 1978. He also served for ten years on the Governing Body of the Glasshouse Crops Research Institute.

Following from his interest in vascular wilt diseases, he was invited to provide expert advice by overseas governments, which brought him into contact with diseases of date palms in Algeria and of oil palms in Nigeria. Research that developed from these consultancies led to the creation of the hottest and brightest glasshouses in the north of England. Sometimes,

after overseas visits, he would delight in causing consternation among customs officials at Manchester Airport when (legitimately) importing diseased plant material.

A wide circle of plant pathologists in learned societies came to appreciate John Colhoun’s energetic participation, serving on the Councils of the Association of Applied Biologists and the British Mycological Society, of which he was President in 1963. In 1968 he was elected Chairman of the Federation of British Plant Pathologists, forerunner of the British Society for Plant Pathology (BSPP), having been active in the foundation of the Federation two years before. In recognition of his outstanding services to Plant Pathology he was made an Honorary Member of the BSPP in 1989. He was also an Editor and then Joint Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Phytopathology* (formerly *Phytopathologische Zeitschrift*) for nearly 20 years, including a substantial period after retirement. He retired from Manchester University in 1980 as Professor Emeritus, having occupied the Barker Chair of Cryptogamic Botany for 20 years.

Outside his scientific and academic work, John had many interests. He loved gardens and gardening and travelled widely in the UK and abroad photographing and recording historic gardens. He was much in demand for lectures on this subject, which he greatly enjoyed giving. He also gave talks to antique clubs as he was knowledgeable on a variety of subjects such as antique silver, Irish glass and Belleek china.

John was a clubbable person who enjoyed good company and who was, himself, good company. He was a generous host, often providing accommodation to visitors to the department, and many guests benefited from his extensive collection of single malt whiskies. After his move to Manchester, and due to the need for frequent meetings in London, he became, fully, a clubman, being a member of the Authors, the Farmers and the Athenaeum. John enjoyed entertaining colleagues in these surroundings, and continued his links with Queen’s, becoming President of the Queen’s University Club, London, from 1983 to 1985.

John was a devoted family man taking great pride in his three daughters and four grandchildren. It was a very heavy blow when his eldest daughter Lucy died tragically young in May 1997, a loss that was intensified when Margaret died only a short time later in September of the same year. John was sustained in this terribly sad period by his strong religious convictions and the support of his daughters Ana and Jacqui.

John died in Stockport, Cheshire, on 5 January 2002 after a short illness.

Whether we knew him as a fellow plant pathologist, colleague, research supervisor, or teacher, we benefited from his enquiring mind and his scientific expertise. For many, he was also a wise counsellor, a convivial companion or a friend. While we mourn his loss we should also rejoice in his long and productive life, lived to the full.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to John's nephew, Maurice Hillis, for permission to use elements of his Address at John's funeral.

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