

Obituary

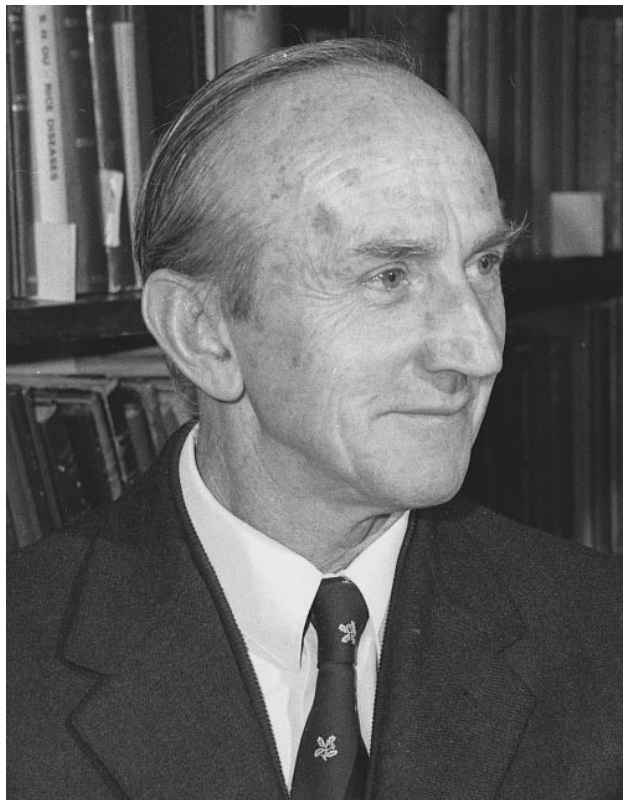
Martin Beazor Ellis, 1911–1996**B. C. SUTTON* AND E. MORDUE***International Mycological Institute, Bakeham Lane, Egham, Surrey TW20 9TY and* Old School House, Chapel Street, Bildeston, Suffolk IP7 7EP*

With the death of Martin Ellis on 8 June 1996, after a short illness, the Society lost a former President and Honorary member, the International Mycological Institute a Chief Mycologist of long and illustrious standing, mycology a twentieth-century pioneer in the study of hyphomycetes, and amateurs worldwide a popularizer of the collection and identification of microfungi. He was certainly no parochial mycologist for he enjoyed an international reputation built not only on admiration for his work and the clarity of its presentation but also his ability in correspondence and by personal discussion and example to help and stimulate others to emulate his high standards. His was a singular mycological life which as far as his published work is concerned initially may have seemed somewhat overfocused on his handsome (as

he often put it) hyphomycetes. This belies the talents that he brought to bear on his subject such as a love of languages, a deep understanding and knowledge of nature, an illustrator's eye and the capability of translating this into scientifically accurate but artistic figures, and sheer hard work. He had an ability to organize the whole of his activities so systematically that were he to have been brought up in the computerized age he would have had no problem at all in adapting to it (his comprehensive card indices were a delight to use).

He was born on 14 September 1911 at Calais in Guernsey, the younger brother of the later well-known naturalist Ted Ellis, into a family that originated in Great Yarmouth, moved to Guernsey but later returned to East Anglia, settling in Gorleston on Sea in 1920. It is from these times that the template for his life was to some extent laid down. His interest in nature and wildlife originated in Guernsey where both brothers first became aware of the significance of written records through their father's notes on his gardening/horticultural experiments. They were also encouraged to explore the island and they developed a comradeship and fascination for the natural order that remained with them throughout their lives. Indeed his brother helped materially in his development and provided inspiration and encouragement. His interest in languages must have come from his early lessons where the teaching was in French and English. His artistic talents in mycology were certainly not latent; they clearly came from his mother who sold watercolours and later embroidered landscapes. She it was who taught him to draw and paint.

His formal education commenced at Yarmouth Grammar School. He was by then a young member of the Great Yarmouth Naturalists' Society. A Mr Hurrell introduced the two brothers to micro-organisms, for he had a microscope which he allowed them to use. Martin left school in 1926 to become apprenticed to Palmer's store in Great Yarmouth for 3 years, but he became somewhat bored and decided to do a degree. He matriculated from London University in 1933 working from home and then went to Norwich Technical College to do inter-B.Sc., with his brother, by then at the Castle Museum, Norwich, assisting with the travel costs. During this time he was appointed as a laboratory assistant in the college and additional work in coaching helped ease the



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financial burden of finding fares and buying books. He came under the influence of H. J. Howard, who was a well-known authority on myxomycetes, and he started painting them from the dissecting microscope. He gained an external inter-B.Sc. from London in 1935 but went on coaching and working at the college until 1936. It was then that his father agreed to pay for him to go to London University for 2 years. By this time he had decided that mycology was his main interest. This was directly due to the fact that his brother was keen on rust fungi, had corresponded with W. B. Grove on coelomycetes, then possessed a microscope and encouraged him to collect microfungi. He opted to study with Dr B. Barnes at Chelsea Polytechnic and took the examinations in 1938. However, on looking up the results in the library he did not find his name and assumed he had failed. His brother told him to look in the correct place, and there on a separate page he was listed with honours 1st class! He returned to Chelsea for a year demonstrating, lecturing and private coaching and carrying out research on the structure of *Taxus* fruits.

In October 1939 he enlisted in the RAMC and was sent on a draft for what was then unpartitioned India and was eventually posted to Quetta to the District Laboratory where he worked until 1942. It was due to his helping a Major Sachs with research on *Shigas bacillus* (causing dysentery) that he was recommended for commission. He was posted to Calcutta to organize the setting up of a medical stores inspection unit and made officer in charge with the rank of Captain. After taking examinations in Urdu he transferred to the Indian Army Ordnance Corps. In August 1943 he went to Lahore to take over the largest inspection depot in India and stayed until 1945. Throughout this service period he either organized forays for those that were interested or went collecting himself, and there are many samples in the IMI and K herbaria which he made during his time in India. He travelled widely in the Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan and Kashmir. With the help of a Nepalese plant collector he forayed for microfungi for himself and polypores for Professor S. R. Bose, who let him have laboratory space and a microscope in Calcutta.

After war service he wanted to continue in mycology and applied for a position as a junior mycologist at what was then known as the Commonwealth Mycological Institute. In his account of M. B. Ellis for *Interim* no. 106 (1996), David Minter cites the correspondence on file at IMI as fascinating reading. Justifying the addition of another mycologist in 1946 to work alongside E. W. Mason, G. R. Bisby and S. J. Hughes, it was stated that 'it takes 10 years to make a good systematist and that if Bisby carries on until 65 it will allow only 8 years to train someone to replace him'. In 1946 Martin Ellis was appointed into this illustrious milieu with the recommendation that he was undoubtedly a real enthusiast and a thorough worker. He immediately joined the British Mycological Society. He had visited the Institute as early as 1933 and met E. W. Mason, but then had no idea how much he would be influenced by him. Mason was remarkable in having a deep and genuine interest in microfungi, their collection, observation, culture and life histories. He had a profound influence not only on Ellis and Hughes but also the following generations of mycologists at the Institute who worked in the ascomycetes, hyphomycetes and coelomycetes.

With the library, accessible current literature and herbarium resources that IMI could provide, supplemented by those available at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew next door, his career developed rapidly into one which was highly productive. Other factors than material ones contributed to his growing authority in mycology and these were largely personal ones. Not only did he come from a family steeped in natural history but he had the good fortune to marry a kindred spirit, namely Pamela Morgan. That both were mycologists was the most happy of coincidences. Pam had taken a degree in general science at Reading University in 1940 and in 1946 obtained an ex-serviceperson's grant to do a Diploma in systematic mycology with Professor C. Chesters at Nottingham University. It was during forays that she met Martin and eventually became engaged. In September 1947 she became an assistant lecturer but this was short-lived for they married in September 1948. During their honeymoon in Guernsey they augmented by 400 names the list of fungi from that island made in 1947 by the brothers Ellis. This was published by the Société Guernsaise in their Reports and Transactions. Pam also contributed to published work with Ted and Martin Ellis on marsh and fen fungi during these early years, and later in their retirement Pam made significant input to other work that they carried out together. Another aspect of Pam and Martin's teamwork (it involved their boys too) was the warm hospitality they extended to many colleagues from home and abroad. A personal trait which Martin maintained throughout his life was to rise early. He always got up at 5 a.m. and would be drawing and dotting microfungi for 2 hours before breakfast!

During the 30 years spent in IMI, for the last 16 of which he functioned as Chief or Principal Mycologist, he obtained his Ph.D. from the University of London in 1955 and produced a steady flow of published work. His lineage as a taxonomist and that of his early colleague, S. J. Hughes, was direct from E. W. Mason, and although Hughes made the philosophical breakthrough in systematics of hyphomycetes, it was Ellis who put those ideas into wide practice and in effect popularized them. Initially he wrote a number of papers for the *Transactions*, a few alone but others in coauthorship with his brother and wife, and with R. W. G. Dennis and G. R. Bisby. However, these were but an appetizer for what proved to be the main course, namely the series of scholarly articles on dematiaceous hyphomycetes published in *Mycological Papers*. These ran to 18 parts and formed the basis of his two major books, *Dematiaceous Hyphomycetes* (1971) and *More Dematiaceous Hyphomycetes* (1976). They are as relevant to identification today as when originally published. Features which characterized all this work were the clearly written descriptions which were comparable from first to last (i.e. spanning the years 1957–76), accurate artistic recognizable illustrations, an unwavering adherence to the type method promulgated by Mason, and the presentation of results which were relevant in the context of global fungal diversity, way before the current fashion. If any criticism could be levelled at the work it was that he tended just to present his final conclusions, leaving the reader to wonder at the reasoning that led to them. He was also a lumper rather than a splitter, so we find 20–25 years later that his original accounts of *Endophragmia*, *Sporidesmium*

and *Stigmina* form the basis of modern revisions. In spite of this, such were the high standards that he achieved in this work that it led to him becoming the final arbiter on dematiaceous hyphomycete identification. He welcomed this for it enabled him to see an even wider range of material. Unlike many in this position he would always encourage others to publish accounts of revisions and of new taxa and declined all offers of coauthorship, even though he was often eminently capable of doing a much better job of it!

When retirement came, not content to rest on his laurels, he and Pam moved to Southwold in Suffolk, and proceeded to initiate a regimen which would have daunted people half their ages. They set about collecting, describing and illustrating all groups of microfungi, especially from East Anglia. This resulted in three identification handbooks, *Microfungi on Land Plants* (1985), *Microfungi on Miscellaneous Substrates* (1988), and finally *Fungi without Gills* (1990). The first broke new ground in the microfungi for although there is a plethora of identification books and guides for the larger fungi, there is virtually nothing aimed at the non-specialist for the groups of fungi with small and inconspicuous fruiting structures. It contained information on 3300 species with 2000 line drawings from original specimens, and has become something of a bible for amateur mycologists in this country and elsewhere, but regrettably has been out of print for some time. As if this was not enough, a by-product of this activity was the huge increase in the numbers of fungi newly recorded for Suffolk. This led them to compile the list of *Fungi and Slime Moulds in Suffolk* (1988), with a second edition in 1992, and finally a third supplement published in *Suffolk Natural History* **32** (1996). This brought the total fungi recorded in the county to 4275 species.

He became an Honorary Member of both the British Mycological Society and the Mycological Society of America, and served as President of the BMS in 1973. As a measure of the esteem and respect in which he is held as a taxonomist there are at least two generic names dedicated to him, *Ellisemia* Subram. and *Martinellisia* V. G. Rao & Varghese, and more than 30 species names are derived from his surname.

Apart from his work and his family, of which he was enormously proud, he enjoyed languages and foreign travel. He combined these hobbies, for in addition to his French learnt at school, German at nightschool, and Urdu in India, he grappled with modern Greek, Russian, Norwegian and Spanish. He never lost the enthusiasm for beauty in nature which had started so early in his life. He was so thankful for each day that he was able to appreciate flower, fungus, butterfly or some minute creature under the dissecting microscope. It is this boundless enthusiasm which he succeeded in translating to successive mycologists and plant pathologists throughout the world that is perhaps his true legacy, for in the way that he was captivated by Mason, so others were captivated by him, and they in turn have been able to stimulate still others. He said to a meeting in Brisbane long after retirement that 'It is difficult for the elderly to keep tabs on all the excellent revisionary work now being done by a younger generation, but we like to imagine, at least, that they have climbed on our shoulders. And that's the way it should be.' Pretty broad shoulders indeed!

In preparing this account of the life of Martin Ellis, we are most grateful for the use of papers and unpublished textual matter placed at our disposal readily by Pam Ellis and her family.