

OBITUARY

**MASON ELLSWORTH HALE, JR.
23 September 1928–23 April 1990**



Mason Hale, Senior Scientist in the Department of Botany of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, died at his home in Arlington, Virginia of renal cell cancer on 23 April 1990. He was 61. By any measure, he was one of the most respected and influential lichen biologists of our time, and his death is a personal loss deeply felt by all who knew him. Although it is always difficult to write about the loss of a friend and colleague, I was honoured to be asked to summarize Mason's life and career for *The Lichenologist*.

Mason was born on September 23, 1928 near Winsted, Connecticut, and grew up on the family farm there, where he developed early an interest in biology. When he entered Yale University in 1946, however, biology was not his intended field of study. His career as a lichenologist owes much to the language faculty at Yale, who informed Mason that he could not study Sanskrit and other ancient languages as an undergraduate student. Disappointed, he turned instead to the biological sciences, where his choice of botany over zoology was made more or less randomly. It proved fortuitous, however, as it

brought him under the influence of Alexander W. Evans, with whom he began his lichen training. Mason received the bachelor's degree in botany with honours from Yale and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1950.

Mason continued the study of lichens with John W. Thomson at the University of Wisconsin. It was during his time there that he met Beatrice Wilde, a graduate student studying ecology with Grant Cottam; they were married in 1952. With Professor Thomson, Mason wrote a Master's thesis concerning the lichens he collected on Baffin Island as an assistant to Pierre Dansereau the summer after he graduated from Yale. His Ph.D. dissertation was an ecological analysis of the corticolous lichens of southern Wisconsin that made use of ordination techniques developed by John Curtis and colleagues at Wisconsin. After receiving the Ph.D. degree in 1953, Mason taught briefly at the University of Wichita in Kansas (1953–55) and West Virginia University (1955–57) before coming to the Smithsonian as an Associate Curator in the Department of Botany.

Mason spent 33 years at the Smithsonian, two as Departmental Chairman (1968–69). He oversaw a fivefold expansion of the lichen collection, which made it the largest in the United States and probably third largest in the world. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that he collected approximately a third of the specimens himself and curated most of the rest (frequently with the assistance of his three children, Janet, Sandra and Robert, who learned curating techniques at an early age). Mason's collecting took him to every continent and brought to the Smithsonian over 80 000 specimens. On most trips, he was assisted by his wife, Bea, whose field skills matched those of her husband. The only notable recent exception was the series of expeditions Mason made with E. Imre Friedmann to Antarctica to study the endolithic lichens of the dry valleys there, a unique experience to which he referred frequently and in which few will share.

Mason took seriously his responsibility to the Smithsonian and its purpose, 'for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men'. He published nearly 200 scholarly works, including five books and numerous lengthy monographs. *The Biology of Lichens* (1967, 1974, 1983) introduced a generation of students to lichens; similarly, *How to Know the Lichens* (1969, 1979) became the standard identification manual for North America. He was co-editor (with V. Ahmadjian) of *The Lichens* (1973) and co-author (with M. Cole) of *Lichens of California* (1988). With W. L. Culberson, he produced four checklists of the North American lichens. His monographs were important revisionary works, most dealing with the parmelioid genera in the Parmeliaceae and the largely crustose Thelotremaaceae. His last monograph, a world-wide treatment of the genus *Xanthoparmelia*, was completed during the time of his illness and will be published soon by the Smithsonian.

Mason's research was pioneering for so many areas of lichenology. Early in his career at West Virginia University, with the physiologist V. G. Lilly, he did numerous experiments that investigated nutritional requirements of lichen fungi. He was an early advocate of the use of chemical characters in the interpretation of evolutionary trends, a position that has not always been as accepted as it is today. He recognized early the need to correlate chemical variation with morphology and geography, and published the first population-

wide studies to show such correlations. He made extensive use of the scanning electron microscope (SEM) to reveal morphological trends of taxonomic significance, producing in over 15 years of work a library of SEM negatives that will prove invaluable to future researchers. His photographic studies of lichen growth in the eastern United States, some initiated in the 1950s, had application in both ecology and environmental studies. His studies of elemental accumulation by lichens were also used in this regard.

Mason was a member of many scientific societies, serving as Associate Editor of *Taxon* (1980–87) and President of the International Association for Lichenology (1981–87). He printed the early volumes of the IAL Newsletter on his own printing press. He played an important role in the training of lichen students, both from this country and abroad. He also taught summer courses in lichenology at various field stations here.

A linguist by vocation, Mason loved languages all his life and collected them as avidly as he collected lichens. He regularly translated Japanese and Latin manuscripts for colleagues, and was fond of questioning visitors to the Smithsonian about their languages. He sometimes wondered how his career might have differed, had he been allowed to study Sanskrit at Yale as he had wished. With his many talents, Mason would have surely become an accomplished Sanskrit scholar. Lichenology, however, would just as surely have suffered; indeed, it is impossible to imagine how the field could have developed as it did without him. For selfish professional reasons, then, I count Sanskrit's loss as our gain. More important, he was a good friend to many of us, and we shall miss him.

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I wish to acknowledge with thanks Dr S. G. Shetler, Acting Deputy Director, and Dr L. E. Skog, Chairman of the Department of Botany, both of the U.S. National Museum of Natural History, who graciously permitted me to use their remarks made at a memorial service for Mason held at the Museum on 1 May, 1990.

