

## OBITUARY

### JOHN GORDON BLOWER

1923-2001

Gordon Blower was born in Bolton on 12 December 1923. He lived as a child in Farnworth, a cotton town near Bolton in Lancashire. His early days were rather unsettled as his mother had died when he was very young and he lived with his father in several temporary homes in the town. His early education was gained at Plodder Lane Council School where he had his first introduction to science through a student teacher who gave a lesson about magnetism. However, he failed his eleven plus exam and so proceeded to Harper Green Central School for a year where practical subjects such as gardening were taught as well as academic ones. At the end of the year he was able to take a twelve plus exam which he passed and so the remainder of his secondary education took place at a Junior Technical School in Worsley, to which he travelled on the train each day. Here he studied technical drawing and chemistry as well as the usual subjects. After leaving school he obtained a job at Kearsley Power Station hoping to further his interest in magnetism and electricity. Unfortunately the work was not what he expected it to be and he spent most of his time adding up how much coal had been burned each day. So, with encouragement from relatives, he started a matriculation course at Bolton Municipal Technical College in the evenings and in 1940 gained the School Certificate. Two years later he gained his Higher School certificate.

In 1942 Gordon started his university education at the University of Manchester and gained a B.Sc. in the Honours School of General Science. Following this he did eighteen months of war service in the Navy as a Sub-Lieutenant (Special Branch) with the Mobile Malaria Control Unit as a medical entomologist investigating the control of malaria and other insect-borne diseases in Ceylon, Hong Kong and China.

After a short time as a part time Demonstrator in Zoology back at Manchester University, he was appointed Assistant Lecturer in 1948, later to become Lecturer and finally Reader in Ecology in 1959, the post he held until he retired in 1982.

Like many Manchester zoology graduates of the time, the first research work that Gordon Blower carried out was on invertebrate cuticle structure, and indeed his first published paper (in *Nature*) was on this subject. An interest in myriapods soon developed and he quickly became the national authority on millipedes and an international authority on their life history and ecology. Perhaps the best known piece of work for many people will be his book *British Millipedes* published in the Synopses of the British Fauna series. The New Series version of this, published in 1985 and substantially revised since the original 1958 version, has helped make millipedes accessible to many people, professionals and amateurs alike. The hallmark of this book is the intricate and accurate illustrations that make it such a pleasure to use. Partly assisted by a series of post-graduate students, his other major contribution to myriapodology was the detailed information gained about some of the British species of millipede, in particular their life cycles and post-embryonic development.

Work on myriapods included a secondment to University College of Njala, Sierra Leone in 1973, and later during several visits to Madeira. In Britain Gordon encouraged the formation of the British Myriapod Group, supported the project to map the distribution of British millipede species and was editor of the *Bulletin of the British Myriapod Group* from the first edition in 1972 until 1994. He regularly attended the International Congresses and was President of the 5th International Congress at the University of Radford in Virginia, USA. He also attended the British Myriapod Group field meetings each Easter and his love of tea at any time and whisky in the evening became an essential part of those meetings, a tradition that has continued today – at least that of the whisky! Gordon's sweet tooth meant that some sort of cake or biscuit was an essential accompaniment for the tea.

In addition to his work on millipedes he was interested in soil and leaf litter organisms in general and established a special soil laboratory at Manchester University to better study them. He also contributed substantially to development of ecological techniques including mark release recapture as a method of estimating population size. He co-authored the book *Estimating the Size of Animal Populations* explaining this method in detail.

Every student taught by Gordon Blower will remember him for his wide and extensive knowledge of all aspects of ecology and of the British fauna. He was one of the 'old school' of scientists, not only skilled in their own disciplines but also able to understand and teach in a wider context. Though through the field courses that he initiated, there was also opportunity to learn more about millipedes and centipedes. His lectures were always a joy to listen to and his tutorials informative and thought provoking. Gordon's use of English and ways of expressing himself were unique and made all discussions and lectures memorable experiences. His influence on fieldwork at Manchester was incalculable and he undoubtedly inspired a large number of students, both undergraduates and post-graduates, including many who had little interest in millipedes.

After retiring from the University, Gordon moved to Levens in the Lake District, a part of England that he had loved all his life. In his new house he enjoyed gardening, welcomed visitors and became involved in the local community, especially that of the church. During this time he developed his skills as a landscape artist, a natural progression from his earlier pen and ink illustrations. He always enjoyed hearing news of myriapodologists, meetings and conferences, although he did not continue much active work himself. For many of us Gordon will always be the father of modern myriapodology in Britain.

Aside from his scientific work, his interests included literature, music (especially Mozart) and Bolton Wanderers Football Club. His wife, Mary, died 13 years ago, but he leaves two sons and eight grandchildren. His family intend to scatter his ashes on Causey Pike in the Lake District, a spot that Gordon had long enjoyed and where he was thrilled to experience a heavenly Brochen Spectre one day in 1990.

Helen J. Read

With contributions from John Dalingwater, Joan Fairhurst and Phil Wheeler.

## PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

### John Lewis:

I first met Gordon in London in the autumn of 1959. He came down to Queen Mary College as the external examiner for my Ph.D. on The life history and ecology of *Strigamia maritima*. Never having met him, or indeed anyone working on myriapods, I was very apprehensive. I expected him to give me a rough ride in the viva and looked to my supervisor Prof. J. E. Smith, an echinoderm functional anatomist, to give me some support. The reverse was the case. Prof. Smith was rather critical but Gordon could not have been nicer. I recall the pleasure of being able to talk for the first time to someone who knew about centipedes. I still have Gordon's list of my Typographical errors etc. written in black ink on a half sheet of Joint Matriculation Board answer paper in his neat small handwriting.

As he made to leave Smith said "I think we can tell Lewis unofficially that all is well, don't you Dr Blower?" "It's 'Mr' actually", Gordon replied. "Ah" said Smith, "I'm sure Lewis won't mind my saying this, but it is rather more distinguished to be 'Mr' these days isn't it?"

Gordon Blower's work in the fifties made me very interested in the water relations of centipedes but by far his most valuable publication for me was Blower, Gordon, Yorkshire centipedes, *Naturalist* October-December 1955:137-146. At that time there was no monograph on British centipedes and this paper provided a checklist and bibliography which when used in conjunction with Brölemann's (1930) *Faune de France - Chilopodes* allowed the diagnosis of the British species. My copy of Yorkshire Centipedes is much worn and has been repaired several times.

Between 1959 and 1961 I worked at Bradford and was therefore able to visit Gordon from time to time in the Zoology Department at Manchester where he had set up a group working on the ecology of litter invertebrates. There was a large battery of Tullgren funnels in the Department and a highly organised system that ensured fortnightly sampling and sorting. On reflection I realise that Gordon must have been very busy but he was always very welcoming and prepared to give up time to read through a manuscript and advise on the spot.

Subsequently we met at Congresses and field meetings of the British Myriapod Group. At one of these I learnt that if you laid an emptied whisky glass on its side enough of the spirit would drain down to provide another sip. At one point I took to smoking Senior Service cigarettes a habit that Gordon acquired from his time in the Navy. His talks/lectures at these meetings quiet, logical and simply delivered and always very interesting, were models for us all.

Gordon was generous and very supportive. I never heard him make a derogatory remark about anyone. After his retirement and move to the Lake District one had to seek him out but then one was always sure of a very warm welcome in his cottage. He threw himself into the life of the village depicting some part, or view in a beautiful pen and ink drawing on the annual Christmas Card. This quality of draftmanship was, of course also seen in his drawings of millipedes, which set such exceedingly high standards.

Gordon Blower will be remembered for his work on the life history and ecology of millipedes. His Linn. Soc. key on millipedes gave great impetus to the study of those animals in the British Isles and it was his drive that brought about the British Myriapod Group that has been a catalyst for work on centipedes and millipedes in this country. But those of us that knew him also remember a delightful personality and good friend.

#### **John Cloudsley-Thompson:**

Gordon Blower's many friends and colleagues will miss him greatly. Not only was he unusually good company, but extremely generous in his help, ideas, and academic expertise. I first learned of his existence in May 1950 from Professor Ralph Deniel, the external examiner for my Ph.D on the sensory physiology of millipedes (under the supervision of Dr. V. B. Wigglesworth as he then was). Deniel was always most helpful, friendly and encouraging to junior zoologists. At my *viva voce*, he told me that one of his own research students, Gordon Blower, was completing an M.Sc. in Manchester on the cuticle of myriapods.

Naturally I wrote to Gordon who replied immediately. In those days, nobody else was working on these animals in Britain so, to prevent overlap in our efforts, Gordon suggested that I should concentrate on millipedes while he would stick to centipedes. But my interest had already switched to activity rhythms in woodlice and Gordon remained the sole British myriapodologist at that time. Later, he became universally recognised to be the 'father of modern myriapodology in Britain' as Helen Read aptly dubbed him in her announcement of his death (Newsletter of the British Myriapod and Isopod Group number 3, Autumn 2001).

Throughout the years, Gordon and I kept in touch by correspondence although our paths seldom crossed. The last time we met was in July 1983. Accompanied by Richard Hoffman (University of Virginia), Gordon met me at Piccadilly Station when I came up to Manchester as External Examiner for Henk Littlewood's outstanding Ph.D. thesis, under his supervision, on the chemosensory behaviour of *Lithobius forficatus*. As always, it was a stimulating and thoroughly enjoyable reunion.

#### **Helen Read:**

I feel very privileged to have been able to study in Manchester while Mr Blower was on the staff there. To me he always was, and always will be Mister Blower, I'm not sure why but even well after I left I could not bring myself to call him Gordon, somehow it seemed disrespectful to do so.

I was in his tutorial group in my second year and by that time I knew he was an 'invertebrate' person so I was surprised to discover that we spent the first few weeks discussing bird song (particularly that of the chaffinch if I remember correctly). Of course I later discovered how knowledgeable he was on so many different aspects of natural history. The real highlight of being in his tutorial group however was the glass of sherry to celebrate the last one of each term!

His lectures were always a pleasure to attend. The major problem always was that, if not careful, you ended up sitting back and listening and not taking any notes. The lecture that particularly sticks in my mind was one at the end of the autumn term in

the ecology course. He was comparing mull and mor soil types in forests and illustrating his talk with a diagram on the blackboard which he was drawing as he spoke. The picture gradually grew, pine trees over the soil profile, the impact of varying degrees of sunlight etc. and when he stood back and wished us a merry Christmas we realised that he had drawn a perfect Christmas tree complete with coloured decorations!

His manner of talking, whether on a one to one basis, in a tutorial or a lecture was very similar. He would always tell a story, gradually bringing in lots of different strands and aspects until, in that final moment of enlightenment it all suddenly slotted into place and became clear. I remember always being frustrated by those of a more impetuous nature who interrupted him before he had got to the point. I always felt cheated at the loss of what might have been.

When I progressed to studying millipedes he was always so patient in explaining the complications of measuring their length, (I was constantly teased about my drawings of 'bananas' by other members of staff) what to look at and how. He made me think about every word I wrote down and what it really meant. On one occasion when I was struggling to see some critical feature down a microscope and he said very gently 'millipedes are blessed with two sides – try looking at the other one'. Sure enough the feature became obvious once the millipede was turned over.

My drawing ability was always rather poor (despite having an artist as a grandfather) but Mr Blower taught me how to draw accurately from a microscope and then to shade areas in by 'making boxes'. I will never have the skill that he had, nor the patience to use a hand lens to place a single dot in exactly the right position, but the fact that my illustrations are passable is entirely due to him.

He introduced me to the community of Myriapodologists by taking me to my first field meeting down in Plymouth. I arrived at his house in Prestbury at (what seemed like) a very early hour and he drove us down. It was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday that day and, being close to Easter, he presented me with a tube of Easter eggs and looked after me while I struggled with all these strange people I had never met before. On later field weekends, when he was getting older I was able to repay the debt very slightly by helping him get about, but I have never mastered the art of telling *Ophiulus pilosus* from *Julus scandinavicus* at 50 yards, despite all his tutoring! Somehow the days often ended with tea in a café somewhere!

A very clear vision of Mr Blower will always remain with me. A mixture of his quiet manner of speaking and explaining, his chewed and raw fingers and thumbs, his slightly prehensile upper lip (especially when trying to catch stray cake crumbs), the fact that he always seemed to be wearing the wrong glasses and had forgotten where he had left the right pair. Him sitting with legs tightly crossed (twice?), looking rather uncomfortable and apologetic, of cups of tea, cigarettes, glasses of sherry in the University and whisky on Myriapod meetings; the latter a tradition that continues to the present day. We will raise a glass of whisky at the next meeting to you, Mr Blower, to give thanks to your tremendous contribution to our lives and to Myriapodology.

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**J.G. BLOWER**

**LIST OF PUBLICATIONS**

1. 1950. Aromatic tanning in the myriapod cuticle. *Nature* **165**: 569-570.
2. 1951. A comparative study of the chilopod and diplopod cuticle. *Quart. J. Micr. Sc.* **92**:141-161.
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45. 1990. The eighth international congress of Myriapodology, Institute of Zoology, University of Innsbruck, 15-21 July 1990. *Bull. Br. Myr. Gp.* 7: 43-46.
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