

## John Webster (1925–2014)

The demise of John Webster, mycologist extraordinaire, removes from our midst an esteemed colleague and friend whose passion lay in teaching and experimenting with live specimens and collections to the excitement of his students and colleagues. First and foremost, he was a great teacher gifted with an extraordinary curiosity and passion to learn, experiment and teach. He was unique in enthusing many students into doing mycology in its broadest sense at home and overseas.

John was born in Kirkby, Ashfield (Nottinghamshire) on 25 May 1925, the joint youngest (with his twin brother) of four children. He took his degree at the University of Nottingham and had to do what should have been a 3-year degree in two years (1943–1945) during the War. He went on to Hull, where he married Brom in 1950. Moving to Sheffield, he became Lecturer and then Reader in A. R. Clapham's Department in the University of Sheffield. Appointed Professor and Head of the Department in Exeter in 1969, John spent many active and fruitful years and built an active and dynamic group around him until he retired. In fact, even after retirement he continued to work and went on to produce a third edition of *Introduction to Fungi* together with his former student, Roland Weber. This was published in 2007, when John was 82. During his last years, illness enfeebled him and he passed away on 27 December 2014.

John Webster was what I consider a 'holomycologist'. He was no narrow specialist. One of the methods he used to impart knowledge was the foray. He wanted his students to see and study fungi in their natural habitats. Live specimens and cultures were introduced to students with experiments and demonstrations. The result of this endeavour was his *Introduction to Fungi*, published in 1971. Referring to extant mycology texts, John once told me that he wanted to publish a textbook that reflected this philosophy which evolved from his own intimate experience. Every illustration was drawn from live specimens collected by John himself, reflecting an aura of authenticity. Beauty lay in authenticity. There is little doubt that many students worldwide benefited from the three editions of his masterly treatment of the subject. If Ernst Gaeumann's *Principles*

of *Plant Infection* brimmed with ideas and concepts, John Webster's book must be reckoned a down-to-earth text that brought to life fungi in their natural habitats and their relationships.

Noting the importance and need for teaching aids, John laid stress on developing techniques and skills. He also produced several films showing fungal development and life cycles as part of teaching aids. Everything he did was aimed at excellence in learning and teaching towards making good mycology and good mycologists.



The interactions of the biota, of plants and fungi loomed large in his many contributions. The essence of these studies lay in fungal ecology, the life of fungi in diverse habitats and biotic interactions. Fungal succession in dung and excreta, for example, excited his curiosity leading to concepts on coprophilous fungal succession, during the 1950s and immediately thereafter. The sequential breakdown of substrates, John noted, was a feature of succession, given the nature of the substrate. Later studies focused on freshwater aquatic fungi, the Ingoldian fungi, inspired by Terence Ingold's classic paper on aquatic hyphomycetes in the 1943 *Transactions of the British Mycological Society*. The diverse and curious shapes of these conidia conjured up in the mind an evident functional role in dissemination. One of John's later students, Descals collaborated with John in these studies. John used to look for and collect these fungi, for example, in his travels in India – in a stream in Kambakkam Hills not far from Madras (Chennai). Writing to me a few years ago, Ingold wanted me to share with him his

enthusiasm for these fungi while on a trip to Ambleside in Scotland with John to collect Ingoldian fungi in an effort to lectotypify many of the species described by him. John arranged a caravan to take him and Ingold to collecting sites in Ambleside.

John's interest in fungal biology later on extended to studies on ballistics of spore discharge in basidiomycetes, inspired by Reginald Buller's classic *Researches on Fungi*. Techniques of release of spores into the air captured by high-speed video microscopy were perfected by John and his team at Exeter in the 1980s. The physiological mechanism was construed as a surface-tension catapult. Physiology, biochemistry and mechanical engineering, and related disciplines served in the solution of a problem of this nature.

Among his early students in Sheffield, Mien Rifai produced a monograph of the genus *Trichoderma* completed under his supervision. Rifai also wrote a monograph on Australasian Pezizales. Another student, Enrque Descals, collaborated with John in his studies on Ingoldian fungi. Lynne Boddy, Nick Money, Alan Rayner, Naresh Magan and Clara Robinson were his other notable students who distinguished themselves.

John Webster was President of the British Mycological Society (BMS) in 1969 and again in 1996, the centennial of the BMS. He participated in the International Symposium on Taxonomy of Fungi in Madras in 1973 and the Annual Meeting of the Mycological Society of India and the International Mycological Association Committee for Asia (IMACA) meeting in Goa in 1998. At this meeting, he delivered a Plenary Lecture on 'Some advances in fungal ecology over the past 50 years'. At the 1973 Symposium he was in the company of many of his friends, notably Ingold.

Apart from these contributions, John Webster was known for his organizational skills. Mycology showed up remarkably well at the International Botanical Congress at Edinburgh in 1964, thanks to his skills in organization. John also did a splendid job in organizing the First International Mycological Congress in Exeter in 1971, which was presided over by Ingold. During the years after the First International Mycological Congress

(IMCI), John continued to play a pivotal role in the organization and development of mycology globally. He was President of the International Mycological Association (IMA) during 1983–1990 and was also a Honorary President of the IMA.

John and Brom (who predeceased him) are survived by their son, daughter and grand children.

I have known John for over four decades. My friendship with John and Brom remains a highlight in human relationships. From the time of their Sheffield

days through the years in Exeter, they used to have me stay with them, receiving me warmly, besides arranging to show me around the laboratory and collections of beautiful fungi and plant diseases. The Kindrogan autumn foray which I attended with John and Brom in 1968 is still fresh in my memory. Brom's Christmas and New Year cards always depicted nature, and came to me year after year, reminding me of their kindness and hospitality. John and Brom were indeed a rare couple who radiated

love of nature and dignity in human relationships.

I am deeply indebted to John's daughter Sarah for providing me information about him and the family.

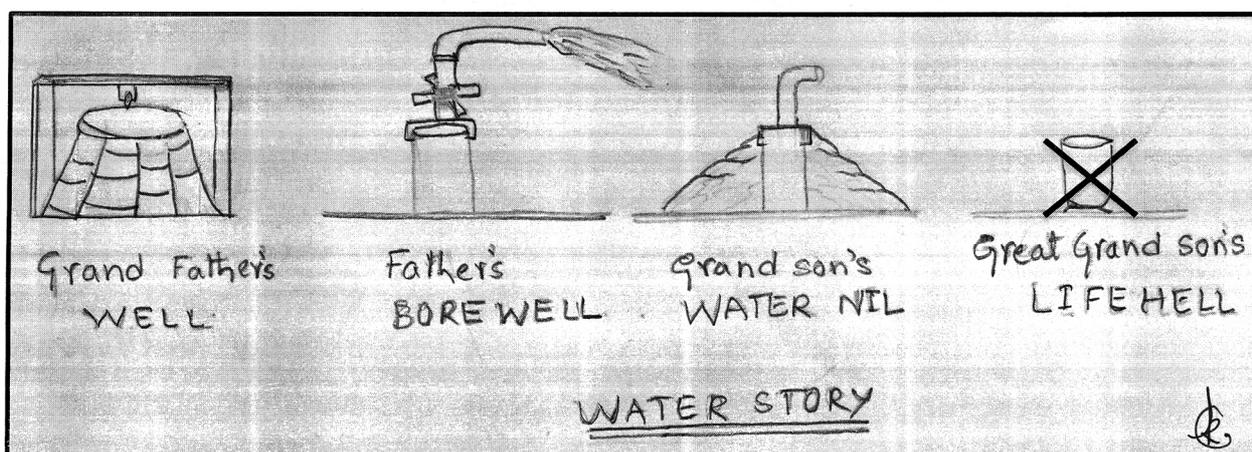
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## Smile with Science

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Water nowhere and not a drop to drink!



Be careful!