

Kit Tan & Philip Smith

**Professor Peter Hadland Davis (18 June 1918 — 5 March 1992):
a memoir**

Peter Davis has been significant in the lives of many of us - as a natural historian, an educator and teacher, a collector and connoisseur of art and communicator of artistic values and as a companion and friend. To those who knew him only more recently and perhaps to students who know him only from his work, or from fleeting references to his little ways and foibles, Peter may be hard to place in a social or academic context — though he appears immediately as a colourful figure of great interest, an unusual man of many talents. It is regrettable but inevitable that, particularly in universities, which are places of passage, even the great ones become shadowy figures when they retire. But they may be known eventually by some tangible sign of their professional effort — the title of a lecture or a building, or the name of a fund. It was Peter's dear wish that his tangible contribution to the academic and intellectual life of Edinburgh University should take the form of a substantial expedition fund for students on field work outside Britain and also financial support to galvanize the writing of a *Flora of Morocco*, this being the only country in the Mediterranean to lack a critical Flora.

Many of us knew the man well, especially by the affectionate acronym "P.D." We have our own vivid and personal memories of days shared with him — days good and days bad, days of laughter and days of effort and strain. Peter's life consisted of several important, interdigitating parts, a little like a jigsaw puzzle. Few of us were familiar with all the pieces, and what is now written, must be inevitably partial, not comprehensive. However, we think that it will not be unrepresentative.

Peter was a challenging man. He was intriguing, amusing, optimistic, cheerful, witty and charming. He was a fountain of fascinating anecdotes, insights and ideas — culled from his travels, his research and his reading — for he was a deeply cultured man. He had phenomenal energy — both mental and physical — and formidable stamina, which contrasted with his delicate-looking physique. He had a power of sustained, concentrated perseverance and utter dedication that saw the *Flora of Turkey* through; this was a mighty undertaking, a massive work of 10 volumes which fully stretched his spirit and endurance. It took 20 years and in the end wore him out.

He had personal warmth too, and a vulnerability, which explains why so many diverse people were willing to help him, support him in his purposes, join in the work, contribute to his endeavours . even though he was sometimes demanding, sometimes insistent to the point of importunity, sometimes seeming indifferent or perhaps just blind, to the problems and urgent exigencies of others. His single-mindedness was occasionally maddening - yet it would usually be tempered by some unexpected, touching piece of ingenious generosity, or some unlooked-for act of courteous consideration.

Peter was sometimes unreasonably suspicious, rushing boldly and volubly to the defence of some citadel that was not under attack, wielding as his weapon a big stick, of which he had firmly grasped the wrong end. But sometimes his suspicions were justified.



Peter Davis in the field (California, 1980).

His endeavours were sound, his purposes well-founded, and he showed very clearly and brilliantly that he had the skills and determination to achieve his goals. So people flocked

to help him. He managed his army of helpers well. He was a superb editor, who knew when to cajole, when to chivvy and when to thunder. He was a persuasive, resourceful politician, sensitive to nuance and opportunity in anything to do with his *magnum opus*, the *Flora of Turkey*. He rarely failed to recognize or deploy a potential ally, at home or abroad. He knew something of the levers of power, some of which, as all academics know, are found in unlikely places. In our experience he never underestimated the difficulty of the terrain he had to conquer, though occasionally he over-estimated the nature of the opposition - sometimes it did not actually exist. These are faults on the right side, of course, but, perhaps because of his great knowledge of the history of the Middle East, he was sometimes misled into seeing a sinister arabesque of Byzantine complexity, when there was, in reality, only straightforward British trellis.



Peter Davis admiring a recent acquisition in the *Flora of Turkey* laboratory (Edinburgh, 1986).

We will try briefly to illustrate the man and his characteristics by referring to some of our own contacts with him.

Kit: The first time I met P.D. he stammered "C-c-c-Christ, you've got a snubby little nose; must be difficult to keep your glasses up". I was humbly abashed and looked anxiously at him. He himself had a rather prominent beak, but then he was *the* Peter Davis of *Principles of Angiosperm Taxonomy* fame and I but a young taxonomist. He saw my forlorn face and was immediately embarrassed, turned two steps away and hand in pocket, started jingling a handful of coins. At five that evening, he sidled round to my desk and mumbled "Look, dearie, I didn't mean to be rude, why don't you come back with me and have some tea? I have a cat". And so we went home, he driving a little dark blue box Renault. To my amazement, he went through *every* red light and stopped occasionally at a green one. Young though I was, I recognized that he was a terrible driver, slamming on the brakes and with a great crashing in the changing of gears. On the way

down, he took both hands off the wheel to indicate a statue and a verdigris-green dome in quite opposite directions, and the little car careered madly on a mini-roundabout. A taxi loomed ominously close and stopped. The red-faced driver stepped aggressively to Peter's side and growled: "I'll push your f... face in". Peter was so nervous he started to giggle and this infuriated the taxidriver even more. I made peace as best I could and on we went.

He had an amazingly beautiful home with an interior absolutely crammed with treasures. The kettle singing on the stove; Muffy, a beautiful silver tabby, purring reassuringly on my knee, and Peter lifting and waving all kinds of precious mugs and jugs, pots and pans - explaining, demonstrating, weaving in and out, forwards, backwards, sideways — I could have stayed there spellbound for hours. I was introduced to the Galle cat which apparently was Peter's most beloved object — he said it had a very *superior* smile.

His attitude was open and frank and a little conspiratorial. I was immediately put at ease. He smiled, he chuckled, he laughed silently, inviting one with a twinkle to share in the joke. Surprisingly, we got on extremely well, extremely quickly.

We went to a Degas exhibition — I remember it was a very hot day and a very long queue. When it was our turn, the ticket collector took one look and said "right, half-fee for the old-age pensioner and a half for the child". Peter was dreadfully indignant, he took great pride in his appearance and several times during the viewing, turned round and asked "I don't look like an old-age pensioner, do I?" "Of course not, P.D.", I murmured comfortingly. On the other hand, I was secretly amused that I could still travel half-fare on the Edinburgh buses.

Peter had no interest whatever in music or motor mechanics. His mechanical bewilderments about lawnmowers, light switches, etc., were mostly endearing. I expected him to be delighted when I gave him a beautiful new 14-inch colour TV for Christmas, a similar model to one I possessed. I came in to find him muttering distressfully that he could only see 49 penguins while other viewers were enjoying 50 as the screen was so small!

Philip: Peter didn't know who or what I was when I arrived. He was not involved in my appointment as lecturer in the Department. I think he had been wondering what kind of a missile I was. I was at King's Buildings, he worked at the Royal Botanic Garden. I was told: "You'd better go down and see Davis". Down I went on a very cold day in mid-January 1967. He received me warmly, there were words of welcome, and many quite probing questions. He twinkled with goodwill and humour, putting me swiftly at ease. He smiled, he laughed his silent laugh. *He* twinkled and twinkled — and *I* was signed up for lots of work in the Diploma course, for three weeks of lectures and practicals in the third year, for demonstration duties in the second year and two weeks of hard graft in the fourth year. Oh yes, and I was to attend the Box Hill field course in July.

He took me to his home, the first of many visits to that Wonderland. His parties were full of the wise and beautiful. He told me jokes and gave me wine. By the time July came, I was nearly dropping from fatigue — and down we went to Box Hill, via London — National Gallery on the way there, Tate Gallery on the way back. Taxis everywhere. We eventually came to Juniper Hall, Dorking, where the students had miraculously arrived independently, and already had arranged an evening singsong.

After dinner Peter steered me away from the singsong — *not* his scene — and into the White Horse. Piles of beef sandwiches a mile high — and then another pile. Pints and quarts of Surrey beer. We were very late to bed, indeed we couldn't find it for a long time, or the bathroom, in that strange old building. Next morning we were bussed to a common. Very interesting, but Peter had somehow, without knowing it, given the bus driver permission to visit his sister in Hindhead. When it came on to rain we had a very long and

weary walk home. At Christmas he came into my room and plonked a bottle of Glen Grant on my desk (105 degrees proof). "What's that for?" I said. "For being a good boy" he replied. And that's how it was.

He taught us swiftly about many things, without seeming to - about botany, art and the world of plant collecting. Because he knew, *we* wanted to know. The stories he told of his field trips: of hospitable churches on cliff tops in Turkey — only 200 feet of sheer climb to get into bed; of Berber murderers approaching his overnight camp in a menacing fashion with large hooked knives — their most recent victim lying dismembered in a shallow grave beneath Peter's drying plant presses; of giant Greek sopranos in Alexandrian hotels, approaching poor Peter in an even more menacing fashion; of strangely oblique, ambivalent conversations with the Archbishop of Athens, that turned out, in the end, to have been about croquet. He was an energetic collector even on field courses; several landowners reported afterwards that they had been able to follow his spoor with ease.

Peter's non-botanical collections — of art and oddities — mark him out as a person of immense natural style and taste — and humour. His pictures and pottery are well-known — he specialized in Wemyss-ware, a decorative Scottish pottery which has now become increasingly collectable.

His output of academic work was enormous, spanning over 50 years, from 1933 to the *Flora of Turkey Supplement* in 1989. How many teenagers of today write about the Cheddar Pink at the early age of 15, the alpine flora of Zermatt at a precocious 18 or discover and illustrate new species from Crete at 19? A current of horticultural interest runs throughout his long list of publications, the latter testify to his lifetime of diligence and steadiness of purpose. He acquired various honours, gold medals and was regarded as an international botanist of the highest standing. His work resulted in Edinburgh's gradual recognition as a leading research institute for the floras and plants of SW Asia, the *Flora of Turkey* being at the core of this reputation.

Peter loved teaching — not undergraduates alone, but also postgraduates, of whom he guided a large, cosmopolitan assemblage to their Ph.D.'s. He worked hard for the place of taxonomy - indeed of botany itself — in undergraduate courses, and for research scholarships to train systematists.

His lectures were popular mainly because his own enthusiasm and knowledge were so apparent. He was not hampered by his speech impediment, indeed, he recognized its potential for impact, charm and emphasis. He exploited that stammer for his own purpose — and why not? He was a natural actor and raconteur — this was a great asset when trying to fire up a student audience into a state of passion about anatropous ovules, intrapetiolar stipules, or the niceties of ecotypes, ecads, ecoclines and ecogenophenotopodemes.

Peter was unconventional and a non-conformist in many aspects. Yet he inspired genuine loyalty and deep respect from many people. We should now remember that we humbly *celebrate* a life and collectively bear witness to its richness and worth. We remember and acknowledge that triumphant life with special gratitude, a life in which we had the good fortune to participate, a life which nourished and enriched our own lives. We remember a man who wore himself out in the service of botany, a man who deserves the peace that he has not lately known. A man who had no belief in any conventional afterlife, but whose earthily eloquent remarks about bishops and archbishops make one think that he was at least a Presbyterian atheist rather than an Episcopalian one.

Paradise was out for P.D. then. Yet Peter is one of those who die and yet live. A flower that will not wither or fade. So where is his habitation?

Surely it is in the memories of those who knew and loved him.

And surely also it is on Ararat and Olympus, and by the waters of the Mediterranean and Lake Van.

In the villages of Anatolia, North Africa and Palestine.

And in the dusty junk shops of Dunkeld.

And, surely too, in Edinburgh, because:

"Where we love is home —
—Home that our feet may leave,
but not our hearts" —

We will always remember Peter Davis with affection, our friend who was so eminent, so kindly and so blithe.

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