

Obituary

Dr Nigel Wace, who died on 4 February 2005 at the age of 76, was the leading authority on the plant life of the Tristan da Cunha–Gough group of islands. His five periods of field work there spanned 40 years, commencing in 1955–56 when he was the botanist of the Gough Island Scientific Survey (GISS), planned and led by John Heaney. I was also on that expedition, as invertebrate zoologist and joint-Leader, and Nigel and I collaborated in writing the first detailed description of the vegetation of Tristan. But the main botanical product of GISS was an authoritative monograph on the plant communities of Gough, for which Wace was awarded his PhD by the Queen's University, Belfast. In 1965, following the unexpected volcanic eruption on Tristan and the despatch of a Royal Society Expedition, he collaborated with the botanist on that expedition, Dr J.H. Dickson, in what is still the most comprehensive account of the terrestrial botany of the four Tristan da Cunha islands. In 1968 he and I were back on Gough and Tristan, and one result was a joint monograph, *Man and nature in the Tristan da Cunha Islands*, published by IUCN in 1976. That monograph traced the human and biological history of the archipelago and the impact of human resource-use on the biota, and made proposals for conservation and what would now be termed 'sustainable development.' Later visits by Wace in 1976, 1984, and 1995 led to a number of practical proposals for the conservation of Gough Island, and in particular for the prevention or elimination of invasive plants. Wace was a vigorous supporter of the campaign to have Gough Island (and subsequently Inaccessible Island) declared a World Heritage site, contributed to the management plan for the Gough Island Wildlife Reserve, and was a member of its advisory committee.

Nigel Morrilt Wace was born on 10 January 1929 in India, where his father was a senior civil servant (and ultimately Commissioner in Lahore). During the Second World War he attended the Sheikh Bagh Preparatory School in Kashmir, with its unusual emphasis on outdoor activities in an awe-inspiring environment. 'Its legacy to me,' he wrote, 'is a continuing delight and inquisitive interest in different sorts of landscapes and people' — and that blend of delight and curiosity was characteristic of the man throughout his life. But it did not lead immediately to science: only after illness terminated a brief career in the Royal Marines did he go up to Brasenose College, Oxford, to read agricultural economics, later switching to botany. It was a chance meeting on a skiing holiday with John Heaney — another Sheikh Bagh Prep School boy — that took him to Gough in 1955 and set the pattern of his subsequent professional life. After Gough and a spell as assistant lecturer in Belfast,



Fig. 1. Nigel Wace in a typical pose.

came a short period with the British Council in London (where he loathed the bureaucracy despite a considerable aptitude for organisation and management). In 1960 came marriage to Margaret White, formerly on the staff of the British Embassy in Athens, met on another skiing holiday, and in 1961 the Waces, with their infant son Tim, migrated to the Department of Geography at Adelaide. Ten years later the family, which now included daughters Sally Anne and Deborah, removed to Canberra, where Nigel joined the School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University. Canberra was to remain home for the remainder of his life.

Wace was an original and at times whimsical man. As a biologist he was very much a follower of Darwin and Hooker, being fascinated by the patterns of distribution of the plants of the sub-Antarctic islands and southern continents and resorting to direct experiment to test their dispersal capacity. Like Darwin, he floated seeds of the tree *Sophora* — which has a remarkable disjunct distribution on Gough, Reunion, southern Chile, Juan Fernandez, Easter Island, the Marquesas, the Austral

Islands, Hawaii, the Chatham Islands, New Zealand, and Lord Howe Island — on sea water and was delighted when two seeds germinated after 18 months of this treatment; one resulting plant was then grown to maturity in the Botanical Garden at Christchurch, New Zealand. A quite different study of dispersal in the Southern Ocean followed in 1977 when — as a guest lecturer aboard *Lindblad Explorer* in the Drake Passage — he organised a ‘bottle throwing party’ at which passengers inserted messages with a return address to ANU in 80 bottles and threw them into the ocean. To his delight one was subsequently recovered in New Zealand and another on Easter Island, confirming the pattern of circumpolar drift first demonstrated by Sir James Clark Ross, who used the same method in 1842.

Wace was a sociable man with considerable charm and an ebullient personality (Fig. 1) — something which doubtless helped when it came to organizing bottle-throwing parties, recruiting volunteers to comb Australian beaches for jetsam, persuading colleagues to wear sterile new socks on holiday, so that he could germinate the seeds they collected, or gaining access to Canberra car-wash facilities so as to obtain samples of mud that might yield seeds transported from afar. Asking questions about peoples’ attitudes to plants was another amusement with a serious side to it: many of his friends will recall the question ‘do you think there were weeds in the Garden of Eden?’ with which strangers were accosted —

the responses giving a fascinating insight into how people perceive nature. At home his inventions included a Rolling Rabbit Run for animated lawn-mowing. On Gough Island he spent time and effort converting a 45-gallon oil drum to a bath chocked up on boulders and heated by a fire kindled beneath — and there is film of him enveloped in clouds of steam as he splashed water frantically when the fire flared up again during his ablutions.

In 2001 Wace was diagnosed with multiple malignant myeloma. His reaction was typical of the man — acceptance, a complete lack of self-pity, and determination to work with his doctors to squeeze as much as possible out of life. ‘We are all faced with a terminal condition when we are born, whatever our state of health,’ he wrote. ‘It is called Life.’ Thanks to the excellent medical care he received and the love and support of Margaret, Tim, Sally Anne, Deborah, and a wide circle of friends, he was able to stretch life out for four more years during which his mind remained lively and his delight in talking about environmental, political, and especially island matters was undiminished. Three weeks before he died I received from Margaret a bundle of papers about Easter Island, which he knew I was about to visit, annotated with lucid comments in a frail hand. The tiny band of sub-Antarctic biologists is impoverished by the loss of this ‘curious traveller,’ perceptive observer, and cherished friend, companion, and colleague.

Martin Holdgate