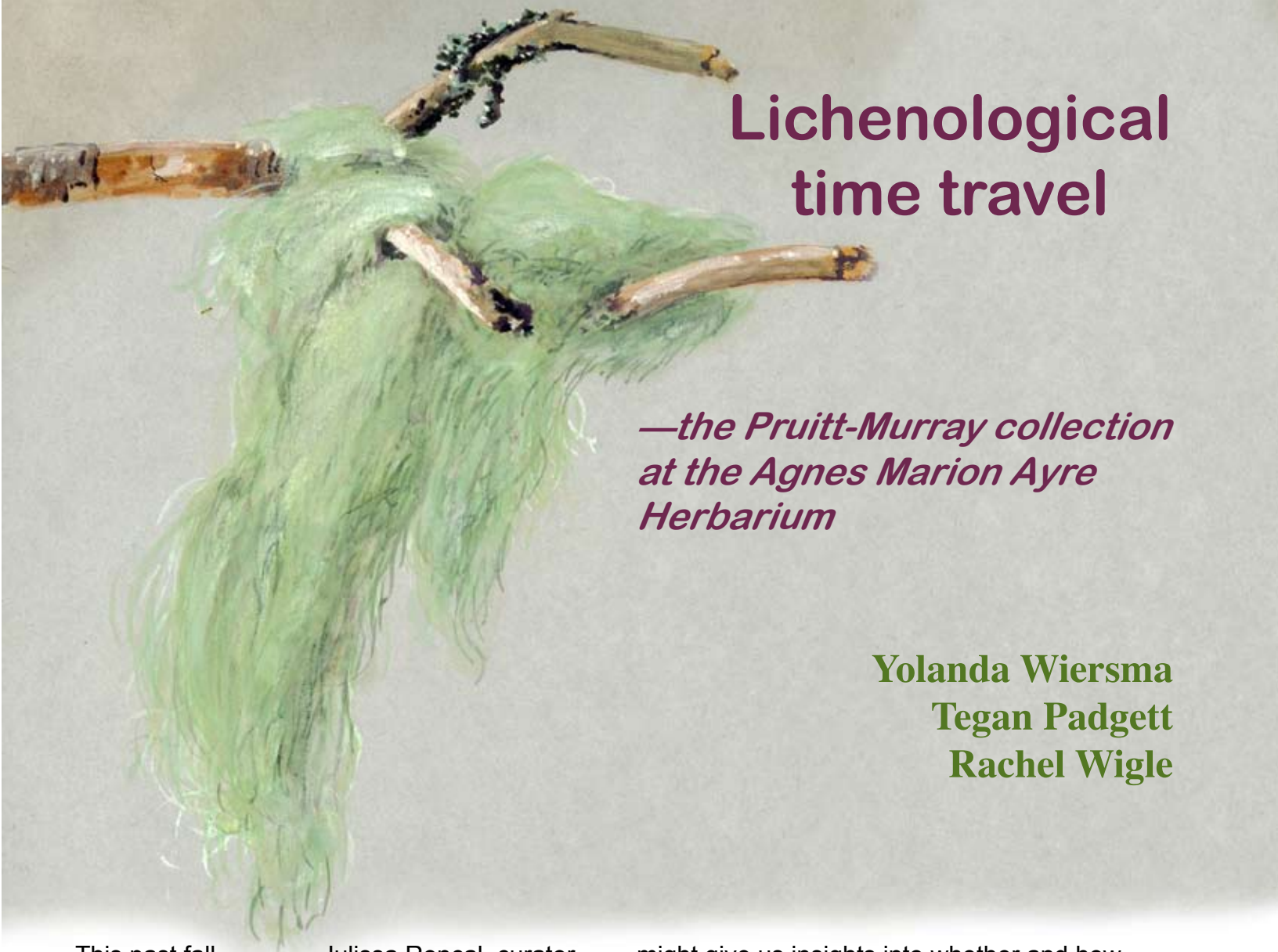

Lichenological time travel

—the Pruitt-Murray collection at the Agnes Marion Ayre Herbarium

Yolanda Wiersma
Tegan Padgett
Rachel Wigle

This past fall, Julissa Roncal, curator of the Agnes Marion Ayre Herbarium (Index Herbariorum code NFLD) here at Memorial University asked our lab group to take a look at three boxes of lichen specimens. These were neatly labelled with dates, locations and collector information but no species identification (Fig. 1). She wanted to have the specimens identified, which presented a challenge for three people still relatively new to lichenology. But as it also seemed like a good learning opportunity, we agreed to give it a try (Fig. 2).

The specimens were collected by two people, W.O. Pruitt (Figure 3) and D.F. Murray (Figure 4), in 1967. A large number of them were collected from Labrador, and given that the most recent Foray was held there, this seemed somewhat interesting—how would the lichen population half a century ago compare to that seen last fall? These historical specimens might give us insights into whether and how lichen diversity had changed in province. We quickly realized that Pruitt and Murray were not lichenologists, because some of the unidentified specimens were quite common and easy, even for beginners like us, to identify. We became curious about who these people might be and what they were doing in Labrador half a century ago.

Some internet sleuthing led us to the obituary of William (Bill) O. Pruitt. He died in 2009 in Winnipeg, and was described as a “Senior Scholar in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Manitoba”. His lengthy and laudatory obituary also spoke to an interesting character committed to the natural world. After completing his PhD, he was hired as a field biologist at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, where, in the 1950s, he and two colleagues were asked by the US Atomic Energy Commission to comment on a project

Figure 1. *Box and specimens from the Pruitt-Murray collection (photo by Travis Heckford).*

Figure 2. *Authors identifying specimens from the Pruitt-Murray collection. L to R: Rachel Wigle, Yolanda Wiersma and Tegan Padgett from the Landscape Ecology and Spatial Analysis Lab, Department of Biology, Memorial University, St. John's, and Julissa Roncal, curator of NFLD (photo by Travis Heckford).*

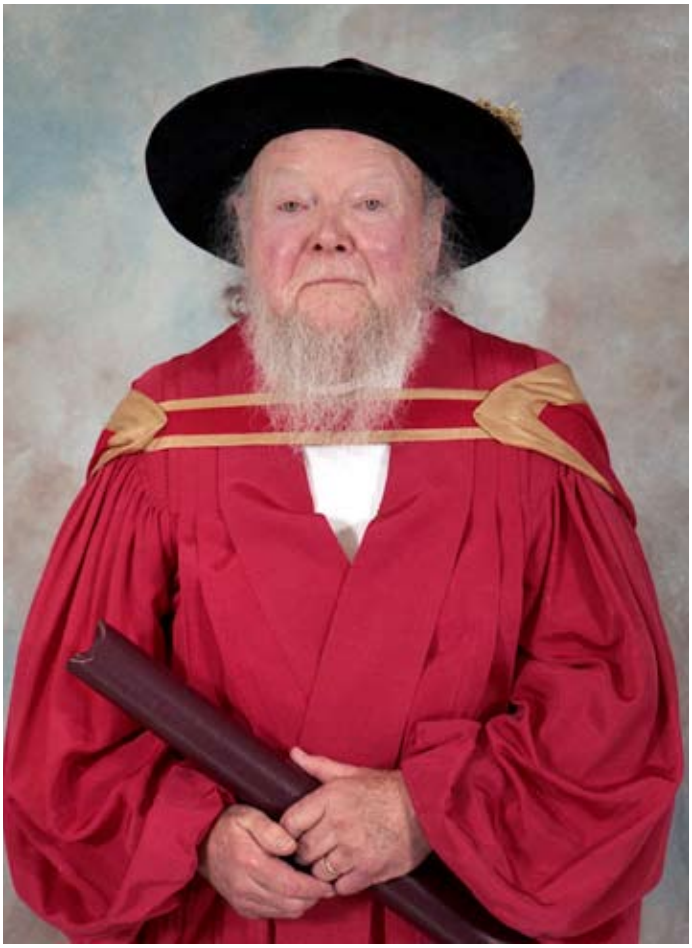

***Figure 3**. Bill Pruitt on the occasion of receiving an Honorary Doctor of Science degree from Memorial University in 2001 (photo courtesy of MUN Gazette)*

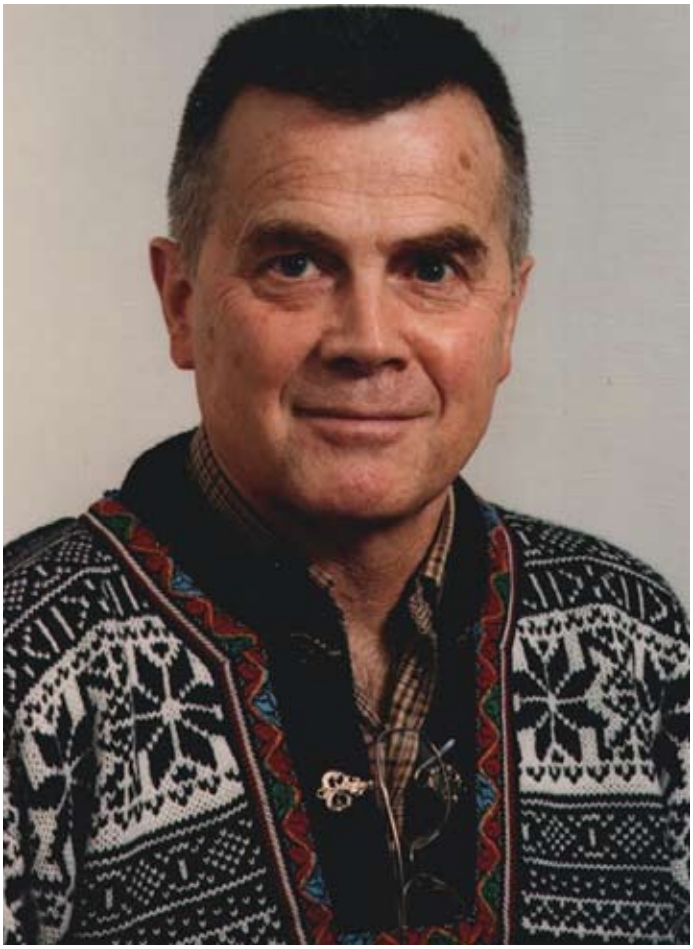

***Figure 4**. Dave Murray during his time at the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS), Oslo, Norway in 1998/1999 (photo courtesy of CAS).*

that proposed to detonate six nuclear explosions along the coast of Alaska to create a deep water harbour for future mineral extraction. Their research suggested that using nuclear devices to this end was, to put it simply, a bad idea, and they refused to condone the project. Given that this was the height of the Cold War, one can imagine that frowning on the use of nuclear technology for (presumably) good ends was not welcome. The University censored the report of Pruitt and colleagues to the AEC (so much for academic freedom), and modified or removed parts of their conclusions. None of their contracts were renewed. Pruitt discovered that he'd been black-listed, and no university in the United States would hire him. Thus, in 1965 he decamped for the Island of Newfoundland and took up a post as a professor of mammalogy in the Biology department at Memorial University. His obituary mentions that he was admired by students at Memorial and was involved in helping to define the boundaries of Gros Morne National Park, but there was no mention of any lichen-collecting expeditions to Labrador. He moved to the University of Manitoba in 1969.

More sleuthing led us to discover that David F. Murray is currently Curator Emeritus at the Herbarium of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. His online CV filled in a few connections—he was a professor of Botany and Curator of the Herbarium at Memorial University from 1966-1969. An e-mail to Dr. Murray filled in the rest of the blanks. He explained that Bill Pruitt had been his professor at Alaska-Fairbanks when he was an MSc student. On completion of his PhD, Bill encouraged him to apply for a job at Memorial, which he did and got. Pruitt somehow arranged the Labrador trip in 1967, which Dr. Murray described as follows:

"We took the Forest Service PBY to Goose Bay, spent the night at a little cabin, botanized the

next day, and flew back to St. John's. A brief trip but a wonderful look at landscapes I would not otherwise have seen." Dr. Murray seemed pretty surprised and pleased to hear that the three of us were looking at his 50-year old specimens, and we are just as excited to see what we might discover.

We plan to describe some of the lichens from the Pruitt-Murray collection in coming issues of Omphalina, a few at a time, comparing them to the collections of the 2016 Foray around Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Meanwhile, Figure 5 is meant for those of you who wonder what a "Forest Service PBY" is. The more curious can see a restored aircraft at the Aviation Museum, beside the Trans Canada Highway in Gander. Finally, those of you interested in more history are strongly urged to read John Maunder's short biography of Agnes Marion Ayre, to learn why NFLD (our herbarium) bears her name.[1] The title banner shows Ayre's aquarelle of old man's beard, permission from the Agnes Marion Ayre Herbarium Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Memorial University Libraries.

Reference

1. Maunder J: Agnes Marion Ayre—citizen scholar. Sarracenia 21:21–23. 2015.

***Figure 5**. NL Forest Service PBY on display in Goose Bay. These aircraft, built as waterboats during WW II, were the most successful bombers used by the Allies. After the war landing gear was added to make them amphibian and they were used for many civilian purposes, including a very successful role as water bombers by various forest services. A few are still in operation. PBY stands for Patrol Bomber Consolidated, to indicate that it was manufactured by the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation. You may think that C might be a more appropriate code letter for Consolidated than Y, but C was already taken as the code for Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, so Consolidated was assigned Y. Not unlike lichens and other fungi, where each species epithet is unique for one organism, and cannot be used by another in the same genus, even if it results in somewhat inappropriate names (photo courtesy of Tom Clenche).*