

Ursula K. Duncan (1910 - 1985) remembered

Shortly after I began lichenology I met Ursula Duncan. I saw her name as a referee when I joined The B.L.S. and appealed for help. As to all requests for aid, she was prompt and generous in her reply, and I found her waiting for my bus at the red sandstone gate pillars of Parkhill the next Saturday. We walked up the drive seeing Coniocybe furfuracea on the base of a wall and Chaenotheca ferruginea on a larch and I was enchanted - by the lichens, by Ursula, by Parkhill. For about 15 years we met once a month, rain or shine, except for the coldest winter months. I would arrive complete with hammer, lens and packed lunch, be taken to the library where the farm accounts were done, and maps would be chosen and previous lists checked. In the winter we went to sheltered dens, river gorges or coastal sites; in the summer we climbed to the high tops or visited distant glens, and in between Ursula wrote to factors or landowners and we recorded in parks and woodlands. We would come back to afternoon tea, scones warmed in the Aga cooker, and walk round one of the Parkhill gardens, Ursula with a trug basket and a trowel in case a plant took my fancy. There are three gardens at Parkhill, none near the house: the wild garden in the quarry from which the house was built in the early 1800's; the walled tennis court with a raised bed for alpiners; and the garden proper, enclosed, with everything that a Scottish countryhouse garden should have, box edges, sundial, fruit, vegetables, flowers. The gardener was probably Ursula's one personal extravagance. The evening was spent in checking our collections, comparing finds with her extensive herbarium and typing out meticulous lists. There was no way to thank her except by working on any specimen left unidentified, and by arranging the next trip.

P.B.T.

The death of Ursula Duncan is a great loss to the B.L.S. and a cause of deep grief to her many friends. She was so kind and generous, and she knew her British plants so well - not only was she the author of a splendid book that is the nearest thing we have to a modern lichen flora, she was an authority on genera as widely different as Sphagnum and Potamogeton. When in the 1950s I was organising a postal lichen study group, she was unfailingly

helpful with information and advice and generous with specimens, all of which came with notes on points of special interest, a statement of chemical reactions and drawings of the spores and sometimes other microscopical details. My happiest memories of her are of days in the field: of her converting a belligerent gamekeeper in Glen Clova into her obedient and devoted servant with a few quiet words; of Loch Brandy in Forfar ("What I like about Brandy is the tadpoles."); and on the last few yards to the summit of Ben Lawers after two or three hours patiently identifying plants for beginners -- "Now let's be serious." She would wish us, I think, to continue to be serious about lichens, but to be light-hearted and cheerful too.

F.H.B.

For a long period it was impossible to botanize in Scotland without Ursula Duncan's name cropping up and sooner or later you were bound to meet her. Whilst a student I attended a BSBI meeting she was leading on the Isle of Lewis (1958), but that was flowering plants and Ursula found it difficult to give her attention to more than one plant group at a time. On the last day however, as a concession, she spent 20 minutes helping Sam Manning with some Cladonias. Brian Fox and I joined in and learnt our first correctly named lichens. Our next contact was at the BLS Repton Field Meeting (1964). I remember her as being a little diffident when botanizing outside Scotland, but apart from a rising star - Peter James - she knew more than anyone, took an obvious delight in everything, and was very patient with beginners. We met regularly at AGM's up till 1972, where, on one occasion I overheard her and Arthur Wade expressing regret that neither had anybody living nearby to whom they could pass on their knowledge. How I wished I did. Ursula's charm included a degree of Scottish reserve, it is said that on being asked if she would stand for President she declined saying it was a job for a MAN. I have kept the dozen or so letters she wrote and note that she was reluctant for me to send her specimens after 1968 when she failed to identify two Lecidea spp. out of a batch of ten. The last letter, in June 1984, was full of information on Scottish lichens. No more Arbroath postmarks now.

O.L.G.