

## WALTER SCOTT MBE (1940–2018)

Walter Scott was born on 3rd March 1940 at Easterhoull, a small croft house overlooking Scalloway Harbour in his beloved Shetland. His family made frequent trips to his mother's parents' croft at South Nesting, where Walter and his young cousin, Jean, would seek out as many different flowers as they could find. His neighbour, the scholar E. S. Reid Tait, gave him a little book about the subject and Walter began to collect plants, pressing them in an old family encyclopaedia. A more formal interest in botany began in 1955. That year Walter observed his first hawkweed – a group that would come to hold a special fascination for him that would last the rest of his life, and he joined the BSBI. Just six years later he became its V.C. Recorder for Shetland, a post which he retained until 2015.

One day in September 1955, the son of the proprietor of the Scalloway Hotel told Walter that they had a resident who had arrived in Shetland to study wild plants and suggested that Walter meet him. So began a friendship with Richard Palmer that would endure for a lifetime. Walter wrote later 'That evening we met; he was 20 and I was 16.....The first meeting included a walk around the outskirts of Scalloway during which Richard showed me several plants new to me. I think he was a trifle surprised to find someone little more than a schoolboy and living in the village he had chosen for his holiday, who was as passionate about plants as he was and with no fear of Latin names. He was shy, so was I, but we became good friends.' (Palmer 2006).

Richard was to return to Shetland many times and in the summer of 1958 Walter and he decided to write a flora for Shetland. By now Walter had left his job in a lemonade factory and moved to Hay & Co. in Scalloway, a general ironmongers selling hardware and ship chandlery. The new hours allowed him more time for botanising, and reading and fieldwork for the flora began in earnest. Although Walter never learnt to drive, close friends took him to various parts of the islands; he also became a familiar figure on Shetland's buses. He visited 348 of Shetland's 350 island holms (islands in Shetland's freshwater lochs) and all the offshore islands and stacks with any vegetation upon them. Walter and his friend Arnold Duncan must be two of very few Shetlanders to have set foot on the precipitous Muckle

Ossa, an island off Esha Ness thought to be a remnant volcanic plug. In 1970 they sailed out from Hamnaveo on the *M B Mayflower* with a small boat and lifebelts; 20 minutes on the isle was enough to reveal that there wasn't 'the least bit of vegetation' there.

Walter left Hay & Co. shortly after they shut their Scalloway operation down and got a job with Alex Fraser, fish processor and shipping agent, where he became renowned for the same meticulous, painstaking approach he applied to his botanical studies, and enhanced his interest in boats.

In 1969 Scott & Palmer published a small booklet, *A Check-list of the Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Shetland Islands* as a precursor to the main flora. It proved popular, with all 500 copies sold in less than two years. This list was the most complete record of Shetland's plants at this time. Walter commenced the manuscript for the new flora in 1976 and began the typescript in 1981 using a Remington 'Fleetwing' typewriter that had been purchased specifically for the job in 1965! With grant-aid assistance from the Shetland Amenity



Walter Scott. Jim Nicolson

Trust, *The Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Shetland Islands* was finally published by the Shetland Times in December 1987. All 1,200 copies sold out within a year of publication.

It is instructive to look at the list of acknowledgements at the front of this book. As well as expressing gratitude to many academics, the authors also thanked the ‘numerous local people (crofters, farmers, boatmen, bus drivers, taxi operators, boarding-house keepers)’. Chrissie Williamson, in whose comfortable home the two authors spent many an evening discussing botany and their plans for a flora, received special mention.

Walter’s botanical studies didn’t stop after publication of the flora – he was subsequently lead author on *Rare Plants in Shetland*, published by Shetland Amenity Trust in 2002, and then self-published *Some aspects of the botany of the Shetland Islands* in 2011. The latter comprises an updated annotated species list, a dichotomous key to the 27 species of *Hieracium* in Shetland, scanned images of all of Shetland’s 22 endemic Asteraceae and a comprehensive bibliography of the Shetland flora.

Walter’s last major botanical work was fitting, given his passion for hawkweeds. With Tim Rich, he wrote BSBI Handbook No. 15, *British Northern Hawkweeds: A monograph of British Hieracium section Alpestris*. Walter, along with Richard Palmer, had described three new species of hawkweed for science while another, *Hieracium scottii* P. D. Sell, was named after him for his large contribution to the flora of Shetland. Walter also managed to establish a few individuals of all Shetland’s endemic hawkweeds, along with other plants rare in a Shetland context, in specially constructed wooden frames at his home in Scalloway. As well as enabling him to study the plants more closely, his foresight ensured that one species, *H. hethlandiae*, did not become extinct when its only known site disappeared as part of road construction. These plants were critical in Shetland Amenity Trust’s successful efforts to establish populations of between 25 and 50 adults of each hawkweed species at their horticultural unit in Lerwick, some of which have been returned to the wild. In 1996 Walter was ‘pleased, embarrassed and surprised’ to get an MBE for his conservation efforts.

Walter’s love of Shetland’s hawkweeds was in part due to the attractive surroundings that they grow in: rocky cliffs, ravines, island holms and hay meadows all

share a luxurious and diverse flora, being the only areas in Shetland that are not subject to sheep grazing. Walter witnessed firsthand how the impact of development and the intensification of agriculture reduced the diversity and abundance of Shetland’s flora. In recent years he became frustrated with the conservation bodies and BSBI, which he felt spent far too much time recording and far too little actively conserving.

During the last few years, Walter had carefully prepared his botanical archives for transmission to the Shetland Archives. He once took me aside to show me how all the manuscripts, letters, records, etc., were cross-referenced; the ease with which any historical record and related correspondence could be traced was truly staggering. He also turned his attention to other projects, more details of which can be found on his website, Shetland by Numbers [www.shetlandbynumbers.com](http://www.shetlandbynumbers.com). Among them, he managed to visit every ruined lighthouse – all 2,467 of them, 2,238 out of 2,248 1km squares, all 527 freshwater lochs and 115 hill summits above 150m.

Walter was a shy man who felt distinctly uncomfortable in groups, yet all those who were lucky enough to meet him were greeted with courtesy and kindness, and his enthusiasm and scholarly approach were abundantly clear. Once a rapport had been established, Walter’s quick wit and sense of humour were very entertaining. His sudden death on 23rd February 2018 came as a great shock to friends in Shetland and beyond, and has left a huge void in botanical recording in the islands. Walter always described himself as a ‘local boy who never went on to further education’, which makes his contribution to botany all the more remarkable. As Shetland archivist Brian Smith observed – Walter was Shetland’s greatest self-taught scholar.

#### Reference

Palmer, B., ed. 2006. *Richard Palmer: a life in letters*. Privately published, Charminster, Dorset.

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