

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS JOHN WALTER THOMSON

John Walter Thomson died on February 20, 2009, at the age of 95 in his rural Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, home. Born July 9, 1913, in Cockenzie, Scotland, John came to the United States at the age of eight, growing up in New York City and coming under the influence of the prominent naturalist, Raymond H. Torrey, who was important in the development of the Appalachian Trail. He attended Stuyvesant High School in New York City and got his BA degree in 1935 from Columbia University. He received his master's degree in 1937 and PhD degree in 1939 under Norman C. Fassett at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he also came under the influence of the conservationist Aldo Leopold. Returning to New York City, he worked as the director of the School Nature League at the American Museum of Natural History (1939-1941) and taught at Brooklyn College (Fall 1941). In 1942 John settled back in Wisconsin for good, teaching at Wisconsin Superior State Teachers College (now the University of Wisconsin-Superior) and finally joining the Department of Botany at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as an assistant professor in 1944. He became an associate professor in 1947 and a full professor in 1962 and retired in 1984 as a professor emeritus, continuing his research and advising until about 2001.

John taught Classification of Cultivated and Native Plants, Dendrology, and Classification of Native Plants ("Spring Flora of Wisconsin") over some four decades. His approachable and sympathetic style and keen interest in natural history influenced thousands of students in biology and conservation, many of whom are now professionals working in organizations such as the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or amateurs contributing as volunteers to organizations involved in natural area preservation. He actively reached out to the larger community, including high school students, founding the Wisconsin Junior Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. He also chaired the biology departments of UW-Extension and the UW Center System, served on the UW-Extension's Camp Upham Woods Committee for 35 years, and was president of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, to which he was granted life membership in 1960. His activity extended to our sister state of Minnesota through membership on the Lake Itasca Biological Station Advisory Committee and through his teaching several summer courses (including the Summer Flora of Minnesota and Aquatic Flowering Plants) at the Lake Itasca Biological Station.

A youthful fascination with lichens (photosynthetic symbioses of fungi and algae that form lowly, sometimes colorful crusts or sheets on rocks or tree trunks) led to John's working on the group for more than 60 years. These "insignificant" organisms have turned out to be among the best indices of air pollution. He made 14 trips to the Arctic. John became the dean of North American lichenologists and was involved in the training of ten PhD students, two of whom, Mason E. Hale Jr. at the Smithsonian Institution and William L. Culberson at Duke University, shaped North American lichenology for four decades after getting their degrees in the 1950s. John lectured widely and published a large number of monographs, revisions, papers, and five books, including *Lichens of the Alaskan Arctic Slope* (1979), *American Arctic Lichens. 1. The Macrolichens* (1984), and *American Arctic Lichens. 2. The Microlichens* (1997). His last publication, *Lichens of Wisconsin*, appeared in 2003, when he was 89. John mentored numerous students in the arcane art of lichen identification and provided generous service by personally identifying numerous collections of other researchers in North America and Europe.

For seven decades John contributed to scientific and conservation causes, having been an active participant in and leader of both professional and conservation organizations: The American Bryological and Lichenological Society (president 1958-1960), the Arctic Institute of North America, The Botanical Club of Wisconsin (founded by his wife, Olive S. Thomson), Citizen's Natural Resources Association, The

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Nature Conservancy, The Torrey Botanical Club, and The Prairie Enthusiasts. He also acted within the university to promote conservation: he was involved in the initial restoration of the prairie in the UW Arboretum, served on the Arboretum Committee including as chairman, was the originator of the first Botany Garden behind Birge Hall, and was one of the founders of the Biological Aspects of Conservation major, a program that cuts across departmental boundaries and remains extremely relevant and popular. For decades John acted as curator of the Wisconsin State Herbarium's lichen collection.

His honors include the Gulf Oil Conservation Awards (1985, with his wife, Olive S. Thomson) for their dedication to conservation education and improvement of the environment, the Gleason Award (1985) from the New York Botanical Garden for his book *American Arctic Lichens*, and the Acharius Medal (1992) from the International Association of Lichenology in recognition of outstanding contributions to lichenology. With The Nature Conservancy's "Thomson Memorial" and The Prairie Enthusiasts' "Schurch-Thomson" prairies, southwestern Wisconsin now has 636 acres of prairie lands recognized with the family name. His colleagues stand in deepest respect of his great achievements. While others may have validly invested in the latest technology, John Thomson used mostly standard biological equipment such as the binocular microscope, but with such tools he created monumental volumes in lichen systematics. If time is the test of greatness, then as the publications of others become less cited, the magnificent works of John Thomson will be valued and in frequent use literally for centuries to come. As long as lichens are studied, John Thomson will be a name to be reckoned with. That is the stuff of great biology, at first glance humble, but in perspective plainly huge, indeed in both respects like the man himself.

Surviving family include his wife of nearly 72 years, Olive (Sherman); son, Dennis (Joan Schurch) and their children, Erik (Sarah Weiss) and Heather; son, Norman (Rose Jepakorir Chepyator) and their children, Jonathan, Patrick and Robert; son, Roderic (Linda Heine) and their children, Casandra (Brian Pomerantz) and Kyle; and daughter, Elizabeth (Dean Danielson). A son, Douglas, and two sisters, Shiela Feustal and E. Jean Thomson predeceased him.

On May 9, 2009, there was a gathering in his honor at the "Schurch-Thomson" prairie in Iowa County, Wisconsin.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

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