

Snowdrop Conference 2009, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

The Headmaster and 3 Professors!

It's always good to have a reason to visit the Royal Botanic Gardens. Early in the year fewer of us are prepared to brave the elements and Edinburgh traffic so it was gratifying to see the large number of snowdrop enthusiasts at this conference. The SRGC part sponsored the conference so our exhibit



was prominent in the lecture hall. About 45 snowdrop fans from Holland attended the conference as part of a Snowdrop trip to Scotland. They also visited Cambo, The Early Bulb show in Dunblane and Brechin Castle. The day of talks and garden tours was as you would expect very well organised. The weather remained reasonably clement, although the rain did put in appearance just as the garden tours started!

I, along with Beryl McNaughton, Ian Christie and Katherine Erskine, had been asked to bring snowdrops in pots to mount a display. The big bench in the RBG lecture theatre was covered. The display was wonderful [I write with no modesty or embarrassment]. Between us we four growers brought enough

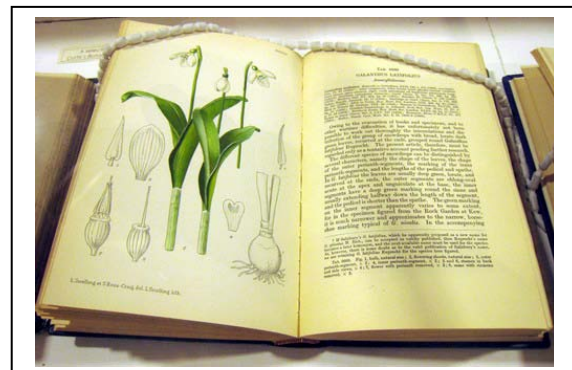


snowdrops to fill the bench from end to end in three continuous rows and there were more in the SRGC area on a table in front of the display boards. My contribution was of about 40 different species and selections. Since they were all going to the Early Bulb Show in Dunblane the next day it was nice to be able to share them with more people than usual. Ian brought many of his selections of *Galanthus nivalis* x *plicatus* hybrids which he has christened 'Castle group' after Brechin

Castle where they originated.



Ian McNaughton mounted a display of beautiful pictures of snowdrops along with descriptions and a bit on their histories. The detail captured in his images is testament to the care he took with his photography. They certainly provided a lot of interest. Ian might take a little longer to recognise you these days but he does know his snowdrops. You can guess who led the question, answers and discussions after the lectures. Give him his due, Ian will make his point and defend it as well. You feel good when Ian agrees with you!



The RBG staff took equal care and must have spent a long time with their exhibition in the foyer. First there were many photographs and framed engravings of snowdrops on the walls. In the centre in glass cases were many books of historic interest from the RBG library, on snowdrops and their cultivation. The books were opened to show plates of several species. Some of the plates are beautifully coloured. To lighten the effect, I was delighted to see several little snippets about snowdrops and their culture 150 years ago. The cuttings were from an article 'Snowdrops on Grass Lawns' featured in 'The Farmer' from 1866. I wondered if could find any details of The Farmer magazine from 1866 on the internet. I discovered that there is still such a magazine but quite remarkably there is another called Dakota Farmer whose contact telephone number begins 1-866! Equally interesting I now know that Beatrix Potter was a farmer and was born in 1866. These distractions aside it is good to know that much was written about snowdrops all those years ago and the Galanthophyllia is rooted in sound horticultural research.





David Mitchell, Indoor Curator of the RBGE welcomed everyone to the garden. If you want a good chairman David's your man! His easy manner and gentle humour is backed by sound knowledge and an honest interest in plants and horticulture. David thanked John Mitchell for all his hard work in getting the conference ready.

Former Headmaster, Rod

Leeds who was billed as 'author' and who is a Past President of the Alpine Garden Society and Chairman of the Royal Horticultural Society's Joint Rock Garden Plant Committee gave the first talk entitled 'Autumn and Early Flowering snowdrops'. He started with *Galanthus reginae-olgae* growing in the garden and in the wild in September and continued into early Spring. Queen Olga of Greece was Prince Philip's mother. He told how he likes to have a bowl of snowdrops on his Christmas dinner table so that 'if his mind wanders' he can contemplate the flowers. Rod made a holiday in southern Turkey sound like a must for next autumn.



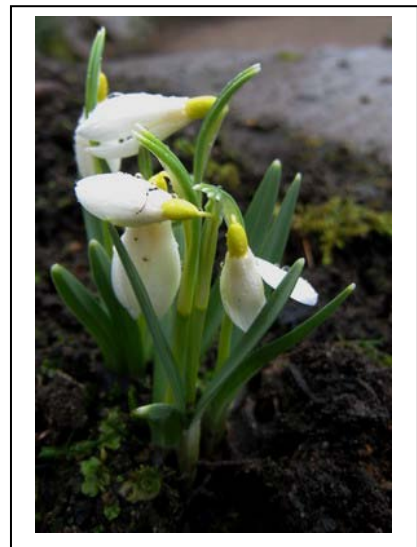
Our first Professor was John Richards, Emeritus Professor of Botany at the University of Newcastle.

John's subject was 'Yellow Snowdrops in

Northumberland' of which he must know more than anyone else. Following his instructions I have visited two sites where the yellows are found. Searching for them in the large populations of normal



green *G. nivalis* is a very nice way to spend an afternoon. Local ladies pointed several clumps out to us. John explained a bit of the genetics, which seemed very complicated to me. He also introduced the subject of 'halfers' i.e. those which are a bit more yellow than the greens but not as yellow as the true yellows.





After a wonderful buffet lunch we were put into groups and taken on a tour of snowdrops in the gardens. Our guide Mrs Gilligan showed us about 22 groups in the rock garden. She explained that 'normal groups' do not comprise as many experts on one genus and that she had to study her

subject. She is a good student! Several members of our group were from the Dutch party and she took time to talk about the history of the rock garden especially for them. I was a bit too dull for the snowdrops to open but then if they opened all the time they would not be called 'snowDROPS' they would be called 'snowWINGS' or 'snowFAIRIES'. Some drops were quite superb.



I had not seen *Galanthus nivalis melvillei* [left] before. I liked the donkey eared 'sharlockii'. [Right]

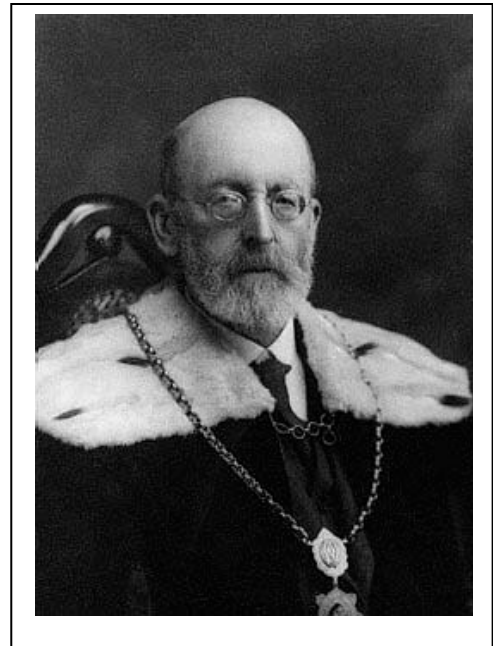
In the afternoon Lady Katherine Erskine from Cambo Estate near St Andrews presided. She explained that





Professor Peter Behan was ill and could not attend. On our behalf she sent him get well wishes. His lady assistant [whose name I forget, sorry] presented his paper on Sir Herbert Maxwell [left]. It sounds condescending to say she did very well but SHE DID VERY WELL. Besides being a galanthophile and a snowdrop Sir Hebert Maxwell was a keen angler. Google him and you will find many superb his prints of Scottish fish offered for sale. Sir Herbert was a prolific writer on flowers and trees as well as hunting, fishing and history. He published over 400 articles in *Memories of the Months* from 1897 to 1922. An interesting point which was brought out was *'that curiously the flower [snowdrop] is not mentioned in any of the works of Shakespeare but notes that Tennyson, a poet well-acquainted with the workings of nature, had recorded that the plant was self-pollinating and as such 'The snowdrop cold / That trembles not to kisses of the bee.'* Professor Behan's paper then went on to point out that snowdrops are pollinated by bees.

Professor Michael Tooley, Professor Emeritus at the University of Kingston then talked about 'The Life and Work of Samuel Arnott'. HE started by telling us that most people know little about him except that he was a provost in the 1800's in Dumfriesshire –the town of Maxwellton to be precise. Michael then expanded this scrap of common knowledge one thousand fold! Samuel Arnott was a prodigious writer in 'The Garden' and 'Gardner's chronicle' at the end of the 1800's and into the 1900's. He felt sure that he and Sir Herbert must have met. Sam grew over 3500 different plants in his tiny garden. Google him and you will find that he too was interested in a whole range of subjects. Professor Tooley brought Sam Arnott to life and I hope both he and the other speakers write up their subjects for 'The Rock Garden'.



We left the RBGE knowing a lot more than when we arrived. I am sure I speak for everyone when I write that it was an excellent day. I hope we have many more days like this at the RBGE where amateur horticulturists, professional gardeners, artists and botanists share their plants, knowledge and enthusiasm.

Sandy Leven