

## WILLIAM EDWARD NICHOLSON (1866-1945)

Mark Lawley  
email: [m.lawley@virign.net](mailto:m.lawley@virign.net)

This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

*A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

### *Bryological career*

Liverworts were Nicholson's principle botanical interest, and he added numerous species to the British list: *Anastrophyllum joergensenii* (with H.H. Knight) from Sutherland in 1921, several rare *Cephaloziellas* (*C. baumgartneri*, *C. integerrima* and *C. spinigera* from Sussex in 1906; *C. nicholsonii* (with H.H. Knight), *C. calyculata*, and *C. dentata* from Cornwall in 1907, 1916 and 1926 respectively), *F. maritima* (as *F. loitlesbergeri*) and *Gongylanthus ericetorum* from Cornwall in 1924, *Marsupella condensata* from Ben Mhuic Dhui, Cairngorms, Scotland in 1913, *Riccia subbifurca* (as *R. warnstorffii*) from Sussex in 1911, *R. crozalsii* (as *R. michelii*) from Sussex in 1910, *Scapania gymnostomophila* from Glen Beag, Glen Shee, Perthshire in 1912, and *Southbya nigrella*.

Nicholson was President of the British Bryological Society in 1929-30.

His herbarium and letters are at Cambridge.

### *Family background and biography*

William Edward Nicholson was born in Lewes, Sussex, the eldest child of Edward Andrews Nicholson (1827-1913) and Emily Louisa (*née* Blaker, 1838-1921).

His father came from Barford St. Martin in Wiltshire, and had gone to Sussex in order to take up work in 1851, having recently qualified as a solicitor. E.A. Nicholson's own father, also Edward Andrews Nicholson (1786-1858), had married Leah Barnes (1798-1870), daughter of John Barnes (1755-1838) of Duntish Court near Cerne Abbas (now Castle Hill) and Sturminster Marshall in Dorset. A previous generation of Barneses was settled at Symonsborough in Dorset in the time of Henry VII.

Edward Andrews Nicholson the elder was a son of the Reverend William Nicholson, who became curate at Barford St. Martin before taking up the incumbency of Tisbury, Wiltshire from 1779 until 1791. William Nicholson married Elizabeth Andrews (died

1827) of Burcombe, whose family owned land at Burford, Quidhampton and Burcombe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

William Nicholson's father, also William, came of a family which owned land at St. Bees, Muncaster and Wabberthwaite in Cumbria, and may have included among their number the William Nicholson (1655-1726/7) who was Bishop of Carlisle from 1702 until 1715, and had earlier sent plants to John Ray.

However that may be, by the era of E.A. Nicholson the elder, the Nicholsons were well-to-do middle class. One of Edward Andrews's brothers became a solicitor and attorney, another was a silk merchant, and a third was a conveyancer.

William Edward Nicholson's mother, Emily Louisa, was the second child of nine born to Edgar Blaker (1808-1874) and Amelia (*née* Renshaw, 1812-1879). Edgar and Amelia were cousins; in addition, a brother of Amelia's married a sister of Edgar. Like the Nicholsons, the Blakers and Renshaws were prosperous middle class professionals – solicitors, barristers and surgeons. Indeed, at the time of the 1881 and 1891 censuses, the Nicholsons lived next door but one to Emily's brother, Montagu, who was also a solicitor in Lewes.

Of William's siblings, Herbert (1868-1927) was a merchant's clerk in 1901, and pursued a career in commerce. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century his son John founded (with his wife Rosemary) the Museum of Garden History at Lambeth, London.

WEN also had three younger sisters – Amy Frances (1870-1935), Jessie (1872-1955), and Edith (1875-1894). Amy assisted with the compilation of a dictionary at Oxford in the 1890s.

Lewes and the district west to Hurstpierpoint and Henfield were a hotbed of enthusiasm for cryptogamic botany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Edgar Blaker's brother John married Mary Borrer (1809-1880), who was presumably related to the wealthy local landowner, William Borrer (1781-1862) of Hurstpierpoint. William Borrer was a principal figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century lichenology.

However, the presence of William Mitten (1819-1906), who also lived at Hurstpierpoint, was more certainly pertinent to W.E. Nicholson's bryological circumstances. He helped and encouraged Nicholson when he became interested in bryophytes about 1890. Mitten was a chemist and druggist - more artisan than professional - so probably did not move in the same social circle as the Blakers and Nicholsons. Interestingly, though, Mitten's daughter Annie married the naturalist and explorer Alfred Russel Wallace.

Nicholson recorded in his diary how from the 1890s onwards he spent a good deal of his spare time on bryology, either in his study, the field, or cultivating liverworts in his greenhouse. He compiled an admirable account of the hepatics of Sussex which was published in the *Hastings and East Sussex Naturalist* in 1911.

Nicholson was as much an entomologist as a botanist from childhood until his middle years, and had an excellent collection of butterflies and moths. He also took much interest in archaeology, and was secretary of the Sussex Archaeological Society for 14 years.

He went to school at Marlborough at the age of eleven, but contracted pneumonia and left early, completing his schooling under a private tutor. He studied law in London, being intended for his father's law practice in Lewes, where he remained an active partner until 1930.

He was still living with his parents at the age of 35 in 1901, but fifteen years later he married Eleanor (Nellie) Catherine Calvert (born 1875) in her home town of Portsmouth. Eleanor had also passed her fortieth birthday when she married, and there were no children of the marriage. It is noticeable that many leading naturalists failed to rear a family, but perhaps this is unsurprising if one accepts that lack of issue explains why they had more time for (and less distraction from) natural history. In addition to the three leading British bryologists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – Dixon, MacVicar and Nicholson – who did not raise a family of their own, one might add the names of Armitage, Barker, Braithwaite, both Duncans, Jones, Knight, Ley, and William Wilson – a list which could easily be extended, particularly if the net were cast further back and forward in time.

Eleanor was a daughter of the Reverend Calvert Parker Calvert (born 1847), whose career took the family to Lewes in the late 1870s and early 1880s, so perhaps William and Eleanor met each other at that time. The Calverts moved on to Portsmouth in the early 1880s. Eleanor's brother, Thomas Frederick Parker Calvert (1883-1938) became a naval officer and rose to hold command of the Second Cruiser Squadron of the Home Fleet.

Nicholson loved travelling abroad, and made many journeys in company with his friend Hugh Dixon, visiting such far-flung countries as Lapland, Crete, Sicily, southern Portugal and the Algarve.

During the First World War, Nicholson served with the local volunteers, and for many years was chairman of the Lewes Gas Company, as well as playing an important part in founding the Victoria Hospital.

In later years, cardiac insufficiency restricted his ability to explore on foot and bicycle, but he continued to explore the countryside by car until the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1940 he left Lewes for Cornwall, and died at Mullion. His grave is in the churchyard at Landewednack.

### *Acknowledgement*

Harry Wilkinson, great-nephew of W.E. Nicholson, very kindly sent me copies of documents concerning the Nicholson and Blaker families, and their relatives.