

## WILLIAM PHILLIPS HAMILTON (1840-1910)

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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/>

### *Family background and biography*

William Phillips Hamilton was the elder son of William Hamilton (1798-?1858) and Elizabeth (*née* Phillips, 1809-1891). WPH was born on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1840 in Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, his parents having married at Caledon, Cape Colony the previous November. William was master of a vessel at some stage of his career, so may have transported troops from England. William Hamilton also became governor of one of Her Majesty's prisons. Elizabeth had travelled from England as governess to the children of a Major Barnes, whose regiment had been posted to South Africa.

William Hamilton was the fifth child of John Hamilton, merchant, (died 1810) and Dorothy (*née* Hampton, 1771-1838) of Whitehaven, Cumberland. A manuscript written by WPH states that John Hamilton was a grandson of a Duke of Hamilton, but no lineage has been traced.

Two centuries ago, Whitehaven was a thriving port, with maritime commerce a vital part of its economic profile, in which the Hamiltons played a prominent part. Several of William's siblings travelled the seas, and two – Jane (wife of James Gatliff) and Henry died in Buenos Aires, Argentina on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1858. William Hamilton may also have died there at that time.

Elizabeth Phillips was born at Hanwood, near Shrewsbury, Shropshire, a daughter of Thomas Phillips (1778-1845) and Elizabeth (*née* Cross, died 1847). She was an elder sister of William Phillips (1822-1905), who became a respected antiquarian and naturalist, author of *A Manual of the British Discomycetes* (1877).

William and Elizabeth Hamilton were based in South Africa by 1839 and remained there until at least 1842, when WPH's younger brother James John was born, but Elizabeth and the two boys were living in Shrewsbury by the time of the 1851 Census Return.

Ten years later, Elizabeth was widowed, and working as a dressmaker in Shrewsbury, probably for her blood-relatives the Phillipses, who had a tailor's business in the town. Her sons, too, being fatherless, were apprenticed in the trade, and both later became

master tailors. Perhaps they also started in the family business; their uncle William Phillips employed 40 people at the time of the 1881 Census. By that time, though, WPH was himself self-employed, with ten people working for him.

WPH married Celia Vine (1851-1934) in 1878. She was a younger daughter of James Vine, who worked for the Inland Revenue, and Marion (*née* Waddell). Celia and WPH had three children – William Cecil (born 1879), Elizabeth (Bessie) Marion (born 1882) and Herbert James (born 1883). William Cecil died of Bright's Disease in 1891 at the age of 12. Indeed, 1891 was a terrible year for WPH, for his mother and brother also died within a few months of William Cecil. John Pool, the Registrar who signed the three death-certificates was likely the same John Pool who had married one of Celia's sisters. Indeed, the 1890s reached a domestic nadir for WPH when Celia had an affair with the Reverend John Andrews, formerly headmaster of Shrewsbury High School. Their romance was sufficiently flagrant for Hamilton to knock Andrews down in the street on one occasion. Andrews and Celia eloped to the United States of America and were not present to answer the charges at William Hamilton's divorce hearing on January 17/18<sup>th</sup> 1896, when the judge was sharply critical of such conduct by a clergyman. Hamilton had sought damages from Andrews, but the latter had apparently sold up everything prior to skipping town. Celia Hamilton married Andrews in America on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1897.

WPH's daughter Bessie married in 1909, and went to live at Caversham, Oxfordshire. Herbert James had gone to Australia in 1907, but returned to Shrewsbury to marry his sweetheart in 1909/10, and then emigrated permanently to Renmark in South Australia, moving to Tasmania in 1914.

With only his married daughter as a close relative remaining in England, WPH went to live with her in Caversham, and died there on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1910.

### *Botanical career*

Hamilton very likely found his interest in natural history kindled by his maternal uncle William, who had taken up botany in the 1860s. William Phillips was a close friend of his neighbour, William Allport Leighton (1805-1889), who published *A Flora of Shropshire* (1841) before devoting himself to the study of lichens and eventually writing the first British lichen-flora (*Lichen-flora of Great Britain, Ireland and the Channel Islands*, 1871, 3rd edition 1879). Phillips himself knew vascular plants well enough to bring out a paper on ferns and other vascular cryptogams in the 1877 *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society*. While Phillips moved on to concentrate on fungi, Hamilton made bryophytes his particular interest, and contributed many records to Richard de Gylpyn Benson's article on Shropshire mosses in the 1893 edition of *Journal of Botany*. Hamilton was also senior author of the botanical account of Shropshire in volume 1 of the *Victoria County History* (1908).

With Armitage, Benson, Binstead and Weyman, Hamilton was one of five of the 23 founding members of the Moss Exchange Club in 1896 who lived in the Welsh Marches. *Orthodontium gracile* from Hodnet in 1892 and *Sphagnum magellanicum* from Whixall Moss in 1905 were two of Hamilton's best discoveries in Shropshire, but excellent as he was as a field-bryologist, Hamilton's worthiest quality seems to have been his ability to coordinate the botanical efforts of his contemporaries in the county. An ultimately abortive attempt to publish a new Flora of Shropshire failed because of a lack of pre-publication subscriptions and ill health. The manuscript of over 2,000 pages was stolen but eventually returned to Shrewsbury Library.

Hamilton's herbarium of mosses (but no liverworts) is at Shrewsbury Museum. Many of these gatherings he collected himself. The National Museum and Gallery of Wales at Cardiff also has about 87 of his bryophytes, collected between 1886 and 1906.

#### *Acknowledgement*

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