

## C. A. COGNIAUX (1841–1916)\*

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Célestin Alfred Cogniaux, third of eight children of a customs officer, was born on the 7th of April, 1841, in the village of Robechies on the border between Belgium and France. A promising pupil from the start, he got his higher education at the Ecole Normale in Nivelles where he received a teacher's diploma at the age of 22.

The next ten years Cogniaux taught at five different schools until 1872, when he was offered a position at the Jardin Botanique in Brussels due to the influence of his friend and mentor, the botanist-turned-politician Barthélemy Dumortier. Apparently the student Cogniaux, alone and without guidance, had taken an interest in the local flora, especially in the mosses and hepatics. In 1862, when he was 21, Cogniaux was one of the 92 men who founded the Belgian Botanical Society, and his first scientific paper, on the alga *Nitella tenuissima*, appeared in the new Bulletin de la Société Royale de Botanique de Belgique the following year. Cogniaux' later detailed floral descriptions, with many measurements, may have to do with this early focus on lower plants. Still, when 31-year-old Cogniaux was offered the position in Brussels he had yet to show his abilities as a systematist.

That year Eichler, editor of the *Flora brasiliensis*, had asked the Belgians to contribute, if possible, treatments of some of the 'remaining' families, among them the Melastomataceae and the Cucurbitaceae. Though Cogniaux immediately signed up for the melastomes, it seems that Eichler was a bit skeptical and suggested that the young man do the cucurbits first. Cogniaux's treatment of that family for Brazil (1878) and subsequently for the entire world received the reward of the Geneva Physics and Natural History Society for the best botanical monograph to have appeared in the preceding five years, and when it was published in De Candolle's *Monographiae phanerogamarum* (1881) it was widely praised, for instance by Asa Gray.

Cogniaux now treated the Melastomataceae for the *Flora brasiliensis* (1883–1888) and the *Monographiae* (1891) in which last opus are revised 2731 species (and 555 varieties, not always easy to interpret today), 793 of them new to science. During the final stages of the latter work Cogniaux apologized to Asa Gray for being late with some identifications of cucurbits Gray had sent him, because it had taken him "much

\* The main body of the present issue of *Blumea* consists of three papers on Melastomataceae. Nearly a century ago (1891) in De Candolle's *Monographiae phanerogamarum* the revision of this family by Cogniaux appeared. Therefore, we thought it appropriate to open this issue with a short biography of this fascinating, though a bit forgotten botanist. — Editors.

longer than I thought at first” to prepare the alphabetical index to the c. 8000 names treated (letter to Asa Gray dated March 16, 1891; Smithsonian Institution Archives)!

Disagreements, the nature of which is unclear, caused Cogniaux to resign from the Garden in 1880, at the age of 39, and return to teaching, which he did until his retirement in 1901, all the while continuing his systematic studies. Cogniaux had now been asked to cover the orchids for the *Flora brasiliensis*, and his treatment appeared in three volumes between 1893–1906, bringing to an end a project started 66 years before by Martius and carried on by Eichler and Urban, both of whom became good friends of Cogniaux during their long exchanges of letters. Of the 40 volumes of the *Flora brasiliensis*, Cogniaux contributed 15% of the pages, by far more than any other author. Up to the day he died, at the age of 75, on the 15th of April, 1916, Cogniaux worked on contributions on the melastomes and cucurbits for various floras and on a worldwide monograph of the orchids.

His work on three, essentially tropical, families did not prevent Cogniaux from pursuing his interest in local floristics; he published a *Petite Flore de Belgique* and his list of publications in Belgian, French, British, German, Swiss, and Portuguese journals comprises more than 200 titles (a list of publications may be found in De Wildeman, 1919). Cogniaux was also one of the most active members of the Belgian Botanical Society, repeatedly serving as editor of the Society’s journal and presiding the 1912 meeting held to celebrate the first half century of the Society’s existence. From 1887 till 1902 he acted as vice-consul for Brazil because the emperor Don Pedro II during a visit to Europe had taken a liking to the Belgian botanist, whose contributions to the *Flora brasiliensis* – dedicated to Don Pedro – he knew and admired.

Though the excellence of his work was widely recognized and brought him international acclaim, Cogniaux always remained an unassuming quiet man. Apparently he loved nothing better than his work, and his family had to resort to tricks to make him relax the occasional Sunday afternoon at a game of whist with his children and grandchildren. In winter they would sometimes put an insufficient quantity of oil into the lamp in his study, which resulted in the old man having to abandon his notes and specimens somewhat earlier than usual. Like many systematic botanists Cogniaux was shortsighted and had a good memory for things and texts. However, it is the impeccable detail of his entire monographic work that impresses most.

There are two portraits, one showing a young black-bearded man (De Wit, 1949), the other (De Wildeman, 1919) showing an older Cogniaux, very much the same except for spectacles and a now white beard.

*Selected works* by A. Cogniaux (a bibliography is found in De Wildeman, 1919):

- 1878 – Cucurbitaceae. In: C.F.P. von Martius (ed.), *Flora brasiliensis* 6/4: 1–126. München, etc.
- 1881 – Cucurbitaceae. In: A.L.P.P. de Candolle (ed.), *Monographiae phanerogamarum* 3: 325–1008. Paris.
- 1883 – 1888. Melastomaceae. In: C.F.P. von Martius (ed.), *Flora brasiliensis* 14/3–4. München, etc.

- 1891 – Melastomaceae. In: A.L.P.P. de Candolle (ed.), *Monographiae phanerogamarum* 7: 1–1256. Paris.
- 1892 – Melastomaceae. In: Th. A. Durand & H.F. Pittier de Fabr ega (eds.), *Primitiae florae costaricensis* 1/3. *Bull. Soc. Roy. Bot. Belg.* 30: 243–270.
- 1892 – Cucurbitaceae. In: Th. A. Durand & H.F. Pittier de Fabr ega (eds.), *Primitiae florae costaricensis* 1/3. *Bull. Soc. Roy. Bot. Belg.* 30: 271–279.
- 1893 – 1906. Orchidaceae. In: C.F.P. von Martius (ed.), *Flora brasiliensis* 3/4–6. M nchen, etc.
- 1909 – 1910. Orchidaceae. In: I. Urban (ed.), *Symbolae antillanae* 6: 293–696. Leipzig, etc.
- 1916 – Cucurbitaceae. In: H.G.A. Engler (ed.), *Pflanzenreich* IV, 275–I (Heft 66): 1–277. Berlin.
- 1924 – Cucurbitaceae (with H. Harms). In: H.G.A. Engler (ed.), *Pflanzenreich* IV, 275–II (Heft 88): 1–246. Berlin.

*Main sources:*

- GRONDAL, G. 1952. Nos anciens botanistes: Cogniaux. *Rev. Verv. Hist. Nat.* 9: 31–35.
- WILDEMAN, E.A.J. DE. 1919. Alfred Cogniaux. *Bull. Jard. Bot. Brux.* 5: i–xxx, with portrait.
- WIT, H.C.D. DE. 1949. Short history of the phytogeography of Malaysian vascular plants. *Fl. Males.* 1, 4: lxxxvii, portrait only.