



In memoriam Colin Ernest Ridsdale (18 January 1944 – 5 January 2017)

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Colin Ridsdale in the Sandakan Herbarium - 2015. Photo by K.M. Wong.

Following a short illness Colin Ridsdale passed away on 5 January 2017, just two weeks short of his 73rd birthday. Colin was a consummate botanist, who throughout his checkered career was fascinated by plants, their taxonomy, ecology, uses, and horticultural potential.

Born in Bristol, he attended Weston-Super-Mare Grammar School where he was in charge of the school gardens and served on the local horticultural society. His academic training in botany was at the University of Bristol, where he ultimately defended his PhD thesis on a revision of the genus *Uncaria* of the *Rubiaceae*. That species-rich family would hold his active interest throughout his life. Prior to his PhD he had served from 1966 to 1968 on the staff of the Department of Botany, Lae, Papua New Guinea, laying the foundation for his later expertise and experience as a tropical field botanist. From PNG there were excursions to the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore.

In 1971 he was selected in Leiden for one of the two first grants from the Foundation for the Advancement of Malesian Botany, funded by B.A. Krukoff, initially to revise *Leeaceae* for Flora Malesiana, later to monograph the far more speciose *Naucleaceae* (*Rubiaceae*). Leiden would become his home base for later botanical pursuits. In Holland he met his wife Marjolein Hiltermann and here he raised their two sons Robin and Lennard. Since no vacancy was available at the then Rijksherbarium, Colin remained a Krukoff Botanist until the modest funds had completely dried up. However, as an Honorary Staff member in Leiden he was successful in continuing his work on a great number of projects and contracts that demanded his unique expertise.

In 1984, he joined the Palawan Botanical Expedition of the Swedish Hillebrög Forestry Company and the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Philippines. This resulted in invaluable new information on rare plants and endemics of the varied but botanically little-explored landscapes of Palawan.

In 1989 Colin joined the Danum Valley project, four years after the Stirling-Bern main dynamics plots had been set up, and continued his input right up until 2016. He took on the considerable task of confirming or revising the identifications of the c. 18 thousand trees of the first census, and then identifying recruits (into the 10-cm dbh class) enumerated in the following ones of 1996, 2001, 2007 and 2015 (on average c. 1.5 thousand trees each). A large majority of the trees, especially those of the understorey, were infertile. This required extensive collection, storage, cross-checking, revising, and sometimes renaming, thousands of vegetative specimens. The updating of list after list was a formidable task. Over the years, whenever fertile material became available, many taxa could be more confidently named. Gradually, the taxonomic status of the

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plots rose to over 98.5 % trees named to species level. From 1995, the set of smaller satellite plots at Danum needed similar attention. Without this high-level and consistent contribution, supported by the Leiden and Sandakan Herbaria and colleagues at both institutions, the ecological results and subsequently published findings would not have been possible. Combining the skills of a good generalist tropical botanist with a specialist interest in a species-rich family (*Rubiaceae*) is very unusual, and in this Colin excelled. It was greatly to the benefit of the Danum Programme to have had him associated with it for so many years. The important long-term (30-yr) forest dynamics research achieved at Danum has, without doubt, depended on it being studied in one the world's best-identified set of plots. The Sandakan Herbarium also benefited tremendously from Colin's visits where he not only identified Danum Valley plants but also materials of *Rubiaceae* and other families collected elsewhere. During his last visit, he was especially concerned about the well-being of the Herbarium and provided valuable inputs on ways to solve problems in managing the Herbarium and its specimens. He also shared his views on the future of the Herbarium and provided ideas on how to move forward in botanical research. Colin enjoyed the company of like-minded field staff and appreciated the broad knowledge of forestry staff, particularly the late Leopold Madani and Postar Miun, who had accompanied him on his trips to Danum Valley.

In 1990 Colin served as a consultant in the Barito Ulu Project, Indonesia; in 1991 as expert botanist in the field training programme at Isabela State University, Luzon, the Philippines; from 1991–1995 as consultant/collaborator in the Flora of Ceylon project coordinated by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; in 1993–1994 as Mercer Scholar at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University for the study of *Rubiaceae*; in 1995 as advisor for the Manila Zoo and Botanical Garden; in 1995–1996 as senior researcher to coordinate ecological and ethnobotanical research in the Vogelkop in the multidisciplinary ISIR programme (Irian Jaya Studies); in 1996 as consultant for the Cat Ba National Park in Vietnam. From 2005–2006 he was a senior researcher for the EU project Open Source for Weed Assessment in lowland paddy fields in Laos and Cambodia where the collection, identification, and description of these taxa were used to create interactive keys. From 2006–2008 he was involved in the EU Project BIOTIK, creating a first network of South Asian and European partners interested in applied computer science for taxonomy and the construction of interactive keys to the trees of two hotspots of biodiversity: The Western Ghats and the Annamite Mountain range of Laos PDR. Most recently, in 2016, Colin looked forward to work on a treatment of the *Rubiaceae* for the Flora of Singapore. It was during his visit to the Singapore Herbarium last November that the symptoms of the cancer, which turned out to be fatal, became apparent.

The above review of substantial projects and contracts is incomplete, but it is important to emphasize that most of them also involved extensive fieldwork and plant collecting. Colin's herbarium collections in L, from the tropical rain forests of New Guinea, India (Kerala), the Philippines, Borneo, Laos, and Sri Lanka number close to seven thousand and include numerous new species and records. He had a very keen eye for rare and interesting plants, not only in the taxa of his own specialization but as a true floristic generalist.

Colin was particularly generous to younger botanists and gave much effort in pre-sorting and recommending herbarium specimen loans for various studies, and where pertinent also contributed his own insights that were often instructive. He also provided them with valuable literature, that was not available to them.

As a keen gardener he often volunteered to work in the gardens of relatives and friends and to enrich their assortment of plants with cuttings and seeds from his own gardens or other sources. In later years, he spent much of his spare time in assembling information and illustrations on useful plants and fruits and ethnobotany. The resulting database was still a work in progress at the time of his untimely death. In 2005 he wrote a very nice popular book called *Trees* (together with John White and Carol Usher) in the Eyewitness Companions series.

Colin had a great sense of humour. When informed that the Sandakan Herbarium, to which he was a very welcome visitor, had framed a portrait of him and added it to their portrait gallery of Bornean botanists placed along the upper corridor, he wrote that he felt honoured he had been "framed and hung". On another occasion, when Colin was informed that a new genus, *Ridsdalea*, was going to be named after him, he wrote "... I was speechless, sat down in amazement and had a glass of wine to ward off any possible heart attack!"

Throughout his career Colin held strong views on where tropical botany, flora projects, and conservation research should go and he was not afraid to confront policy makers who did not agree. At the same time he was a very kind and helpful colleague and friend who will be sadly missed.

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