

Obituary

Colin Booth (1924–2003): a leading authority on fusaria

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Colin Booth, Assistant Director of the Commonwealth Mycological Institute from 1969–85, Secretary of the International Mycological Association 1971–77, and President of the British Mycological Society in 1977, died in 2003, aged 78 years.

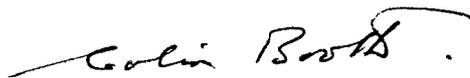


Fig. 1. Colin Booth (1924–2003).

Colin Booth, who died on 9 April 2003 after a short illness, spent the whole of his professional working life identifying and carrying out fundamental research on fungi at the Commonwealth Mycological Institute, Kew.

He was born on 9 December 1924 at Scissett, West Yorkshire, near Huddersfield, the son of a beamer, one who would have set looms in a cotton mill. He was educated at the village school until the age of 14, after which he worked as a stonemason, shortly followed by an apprenticeship as a butcher at 15. He saw service as a telegraphist in the Royal Navy as a volunteer from 1941, but was invalided out in 1943 with a spinal injury. This prevented him from following a demanding physical career, although those who knew him well were invariably amazed by the scope of the manual projects that he undertook.

After the Navy he became interested in fungi through attending the meetings of the Yorkshire Naturalists Union. The mycology section was actively involved in microfungi no doubt due to the participation of both C. G. Chesters and E. W. Mason in forays. He was introduced to *Nectria* by W. E. L. Wattam who gave him a series of publications on the *Nectriaceae* by T. Petch. He was probably unaware at this point in his life just how large would *Nectria* loom in his future. He quickly realised that further educational qualifications would be a prerequisite to life enhancement and duly enrolled in evening classes at Huddersfield Technical College. He matriculated in 1948 and four years later obtained his BSc with honours in Botany from London University as an external student. It is to fungi that he was even more firmly drawn when he came directly under the influence of Chesters (a comparatively stern taskmaster with a special interest in pyrenomycetes) at Nottingham University. He successfully took an MSc in Mycology and Plant Pathology in 1953. The same year he was appointed as assistant mycologist at the then Commonwealth Mycological Institute (later the International

Mycological Institute). Here was where he came under the aura of the second of his formative mentors, Mason (a lateral thinker and mycological philosopher supreme, with a prime interest in ascomycetes and their states). No-one could have had two more different teachers, but they both contributed in formulating Colin's later special mycological interests. Chesters as early as 1938 had published ground-breaking work on cultural correlative studies in the pyrenomycetes *Melanomma* and *Thyridaria*, and Mason in 1933 and 1937 contemplated the relationships between various hypocrealean fungi and their anamorphs amongst general discussions on the systematics of what were then referred to as the 'Fungi Imperfecti'. Mason in particular influenced Stan Hughes who produced innovative work on hyphomycetes, whilst Colin Booth stayed with the ascomycetes. He developed a life-long interest in pyrenomycetes, especially the hypocrealean fungi and their anamorphs. Although he became basically an ascomycete man and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the British genera and species mainly gained by field work, perforce he became a world expert on their anamorphs for these are the states which cause a multitude of problems in crop disease.

It was the submission for identification of *Fusarium* and *Cylindrocarpon* species in culture from diseased crops from throughout the world which prompted him to later devote most of his research time to solving problems in these genera. This came about because, like Chesters and Mason, he collected fresh material, especially of *Nectria* species, and having grown cultures from single ascospores was able to exactly correlate teleomorphs to anamorphs. His early work on correlative studies on *Nectria* and its anamorphs formed the basis of a thesis for which he was awarded a PhD as an external student at London University in 1959. In doing this he became part of a CMI tradition inasmuch as Martin Ellis before and Brian Sutton, Kris Pyrozynski, David Smith, and John David (University of Reading) after, followed a similar route. He settled into the wide-ranging variety of Institute duties, including identification, research, mapping, editing, lecturing and teaching abroad (Canada, Egypt, India and USA), and became the focal point world-wide for advice on the systematics of *Fusarium* and *Cylindrocarpon* as an outcome of his research on *Nectria* and its states. In published work this culminated in his monographs on *Nectria* in 1959, *Cylindrocarpon* in 1966, and *Fusarium* in 1971, and a laboratory guide to the identification of *Fusarium* species in 1977, together with several papers on ascomycetes. Almost half of his published output was written in collaboration as the senior coauthor, such was his stature. The close association of *Fusarium* and plant disease problems not only in Britain but elsewhere in the world meant a close link with the Agricultural Advisory Service (ADAS), where his scientific acumen and practical knowledge of the etiology and behaviour of *Fusarium* in particular made his advice

especially useful. He was appointed Assistant Director at the Institute in 1969 and held this position until his retirement in 1985. As a colleague he was approachable, sympathetic and a good listener with considered counsel derived occasionally from a Yorkshireman's sometimes blunt view of life. He was also involved in the formative years of the International Mycological Association (IMA) in 1971 and became its secretary until 1977.

He was a lifelong member of the British Mycological Society and frequently published the results of his research in the Society's journal (then the *Transactions of the British Mycological Society*). He served as its President in 1977, and during this year, he became the spokesperson for the BMS when the Home Office started to lean on some collectors by prosecuting for possession of Liberty Caps or 'magic mushrooms'. The efforts of Colin Booth and the Society resulted eventually in a clarification of the law, inasmuch as it is now legal to possess fresh magic mushrooms, provided that they have not been prepared for consumption. The subject of his Presidential Address 'Do you believe in genera?' took up from where Mason left off 40 years before in expounding elegantly on the relationships of species and genera in the *Nectria* complex. Ever the practical man in his science as in his extra-mycological activities he admonished taxonomists to maintain an awareness of their responsibility to service other scientists. A quarter of a century later this advice is even more appropriate, not only for scientists but for administrators too as the number of practising systematists is in a decreasing cycle. As a mark of the esteem in which he was held by the Society, during its Centenary year in 1996 he was appointed an Honorary Member. The award was graciously accepted on his behalf by his wife Dorothy, for by that time he was unable to travel the distance from his retirement home in Somerset.

Mycology took a secondary if not a wholly redundant role on his retirement. His interests were wide but he derived a great deal of pleasure from his garden and the restoration of antiques. We remember him proudly demonstrating his wood-turning equipment, housed in an outbuilding of the charming Rectory to which he and Dorothy had moved from Kew. He became fully involved with the activities of his village in Somerset and in particular his local pub which was opposite his back gate. An ambition not achieved was to pipe ale directly from the taps to his Rectory, but he did like to believe that one day he would manage it.

He is survived by his wife Dorothy, daughter Alex and son John.

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