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IN MEMORIAM



Arthur Hugh Millington SYNGE
(4.8.1951 – 4.8.2018)

Hugh Syngé died on his 67th birthday at his home near Salisbury in Wiltshire, UK, of aggressive bone cancer. He was a pioneering plant conservationist who did as much as anyone to give plants their place alongside the animals in European and global conservation. More ‘backroom boy’ than figurehead, with a quiet, polite but firm presence and a national and international network of contacts, he was variously director, manager, fund-raiser, consultant, convener, rapporteur, writer and editor.

Hugh Syngé came from a distinguished Anglo-Irish family that included both his father Patrick Syngé, editor of the *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* and author of other publications for the Royal Horticultural Society; and famous writer John Millington Syngé, author of plays such as *The Playboy of the Western World* and with W.B. Yeats a pillar of the late 19th to early 20th century Irish Literary Revival. Hugh Syngé was born and grew up in Woking in the county of Surrey, just west of London, and was educated at the prestigious Rugby School. In 1973 he graduated in horticulture from Wye College, Kent (now part of Imperial College, London) and joined the herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, helping Ronald Melville to assemble data for a first plant Red Data Book. In 1979 Gren Lucas and Hugh Syngé produced the seminal *IUCN Plant Red Data Book*, 250 case histories of threatened plants from tropical palms to obscure Greek mountain endemics, which has been a model for future Red Data Books.

Throughout the 1980s Hugh Syngé designed and developed the IUCN and WWF-International Plants Conservation Programme, part of which is now Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI). With Danish botanist Ole Hamann he established a World Health Organization global medicinal plant conservation programme, and he helped the European Commission draft the botanical sections of the EU Habitats Directive. An early enthusiast for electronic media, the Threatened Plants Database Hugh Syngé set up at Kew was a foundation of the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge.

After leaving Kew, from 1990 Hugh Syngé worked freelance on numerous projects, and that year he and five colleagues launched the conservation organization Plantlife, now based in Salisbury. He was first Secretary to the Board of Plantlife and was a prime mover in the international network *Planta Europa*. He travelled widely in Europe (and worldwide), visiting Romania for the 2007 *Planta Europa* Conference in Cluj-Napoca and in 2016 to observe conservation projects in Transylvania.

In 1994 he and I founded the colour-illustrated international quarterly magazine *Plant Talk* ('If the plants could talk...') to spread the global message about plants and their conservation to professional and non-professional readers. Produced 1995–2006, it achieved 44 issues before it ceased publication – though highly regarded, it never enjoyed widespread support from the UK academic establishment. Hard-working, meticulous, reserved, fastidious, even puritanical, Hugh Syngé expected the highest standards of his collaborators and was not the easiest person with whom to work. He brought to every project his energy, incisive intellect, ability to gather and process information, and always a practical output in readable English. He was expert at creating clear, concise conservation messages.

After *Plant Talk* and now living near Salisbury in Wiltshire, Hugh Syngé returned to a long-held interest in climate change and renewable energy to set up Soltrac, a solar energy power company. He later convened and chaired a community energy group, using solar energy income to assist a group of local villages. He also did electronic typesetting and the layout of artwork and text for books ranging from *Docks and Knotweeds of Britain and Ireland* (2014) to *Parish Churches of Greater London* (2015). A keen gardener and cook, and a generous host, like his father he specialized in growing lilies and other exotic garden bulbs. Devoted to his many projects and busy with close friends and a worldwide web of colleagues, he did not marry.

In 2007 Plantlife presented Hugh Syngé with their Award for Lifetime Achievement in conservation and *BBC Wildlife* magazine voted him one of the UK's 20 most influential conservationists. His premature death robs conservation and all of us of a most unusual and remarkable man.

John AKEROYD