

Charles Jeffrey:

polyglot, synantherologist and cucurbitologist

D.J. Nicholas Hind 

The Herbarium, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, UK; n.hind@kew.org

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ABSTRACT

This article commemorates the life and career of Charles Jeffrey (10th April 1934– 29th March 2022), a preeminent botanist renowned for his contributions to plant systematics, particularly in the families Cucurbitaceae and Compositae. The text interweaves personal anecdotes, professional achievements, and insights into Jeffrey's enduring legacy in taxonomy, nomenclature, and conservation. Jeffrey's extensive career included his tenure at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he mentored the author and other colleagues, as well as his post-retirement work at the Komarov Botanical Institute in St. Petersburg. Key highlights include Jeffrey's pioneering systematic frameworks, his involvement in global conferences, and his significant role in the translation of Armen Takhtajan's seminal work on angiosperm origins. His contributions are further exemplified by a detailed bibliography and a nomenclator of suprageneric, generic, and infrageneric taxa he published within Cucurbitaceae and Compositae. A comprehensive list of his publications and taxa is presented. This article blends elements of an autobiography, an obituary, and a celebration of Jeffrey's contributions, underscoring his indelible impact on botany and his enduring influence on colleagues and the scientific community.

Keywords: Asteraceae, bibliography, biography, Compositae, Cucurbitaceae, taxonomy.

INTRODUCTION

When I joined the staff in the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in late 1985, Charles Jeffrey (Figure 1) was my boss and mentor for the first nine years of my career, and the last nine years of his. It was my role, according to my former Head of Department, Prof. Gren Lucas (the Keeper of the Herbarium) to “learn how Charles worked” ...! A tall order, and to do so with such a pre-eminent specialist like Charles, especially someone with a photographic memory. Charles was exceptionally generous with his time for a fledgling synantherologist.

Throughout the time we worked together I never ceased to be amazed at Compositae family sorts, especially involving African material, when Charles and Gerald Pope would discuss the finer points of determining material to subspecific or varietal level. Or, Charles, with his main interests in Africa and Asia, walking through ‘the Old Library’ (now the Guild Room) in Hunter House, whilst a Brazilian general family sort was underway – and being able to name much material to genus at a mere glance. The ‘Compositae sub-section’ (as he christened it), with one assistant, and myself, Gerald (then Editor of *Flora Zambesiaca*) and Charles, would often set too



Figure 1. A young Charles, in his Sidney Sussex College blazer and stripe. Photo courtesy of Helen and Linda Jeffrey.

and all get involved in basic curatorial tasks. It didn't matter whether that was laying away new accessions, moving whole blocks of material so as to ease up space on either the ground or first floor (or both) in Wing B, or getting to grips with a generic revision and the curatorial 'nitty gritty'. I think we worked well together as there was little we couldn't discuss, and he culminated my mentorship by overseeing a fortnight of the 'International Compositae Conference, Kew, 1994', in July. Never one for great, or any, ceremony, Charles left Kew, after a very succinct meeting (of only seven people) in the Keeper's office, at the end of October of 1994 offering few words; he departed for St. Petersburg the following week, having officially retired on 31st October. He left me in charge of his reliquae (some 15 large boxes of books, mostly in Russian), his old tea mug, and a dud battery-operated wall clock; the boxes remain sealed!

Throughout his retirement Charles continued working. I would receive his handwritten letters at

regular intervals (the envelopes littered with as many Russian stamps as Charles could find), often with requests for copies of papers that he couldn't find in the Komarov library. Occasionally there would be missives on how he perceived things were/weren't going, these usually following up on news I'd sent him on how things were progressing, or otherwise, in Kew. There would often be an unplanned annual meeting with him, invariably in the Library Stacks at Kew, Charles having come over from Russia with Margarita to renew his visa, and taking the opportunity to check on various references. However, post-Kubitzki (a volume edited entirely long-hand, on paper; by the way, much to co-editor Joachim's chagrin I suspect), Charles carried on with his own research, often helping Margarita with hers.

During the last few years of his life, and seeing the demise of several of his former colleagues, I managed to twist his arm to consider getting some notes together for a short autobiography, or sufficient for me to write an obituary (or two). Several sheets of handwritten notes later (with most of the references, only lacking their titles, jotted down from memory!) he sent a letter with the end result. He had been concluding a script on *Cucumis* in May of 2021 and Charles's last 'opinion piece' (dating from June 2021) was a 'legacy or perhaps swan-song' on the *Senecioneae* (which he left to me to decide what to do with). He was still corresponding with me until late January of 2022, and his death came as a shock. Helen Jeffrey (one of his daughters) contacted me on 10th April (on what would have been his birthday) to inform me of his demise. Sadly, after admission to hospital in St Petersburg on 17th March 2022, Charles died on 29th March. Unfortunately, COVID-19 regulations were in full force and Margarita was not allowed to visit the hospital. Charles was laid to rest in the Pargolovo Village, Northern Cemetery, to the north of St. Petersburg. Charles leaves three children by his first wife (Ruth), Helen, Linda and Martin, and six grandchildren – two each! My condolences remain with Margarita.

The following is a combination of Charles's short autobiography, and a part-formal obituary, including a detailed bibliography, and a nomenclator of the suprageneric, generic and infrageneric taxa published by Charles in both the *Cucurbitaceae* and *Compositae*; a similar nomenclator for specific and infraspecific taxa would be too long a list.

ABOUT CHARLES

Charles was born in London (10th April 1934), where his father was a fireman during the Second World War. From his mother (Lilian May) he acquired a love of vocal and especially operatic music, from his father (Charles Sydney) a keen interest in gardening and natural history, which no doubt helped to determine his future career. He was fortunate to spend his childhood in Walthamstow, right on the edge of Epping Forest, which soon became his boyhood haunt and joy. He was a pupil at Sir George Monoux Grammar School (converting to first to a Sixth Form College and incorporated as Sir George Monoux College in 1993), Chingford Road, Walthamstow, where, in the summer of 1952, he 'attained the pass standard' at the University of London General Certificate of Education examination in Physics, Chemistry and Zoology (Advanced) and Botany (Ordinary). Other interests, outside of the field of science, included literature (especially Shakespeare and his contemporaries), railways, cats, football and track-and-field athletics. He was also a member of The Surrey Trust for Nature Conservation. After National Service, during which for 18 months he studied Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguistics, he entered Sidney Sussex College, University of Cambridge (Figure 2) and, on graduating in 1957, accepted a (then Colonial Office) post as a taxonomist at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he remained until his retirement in 1994. He then moved to St Petersburg and until 2006 worked in association with the Komarov Botanical Institute.

Five main areas of interest may be discerned in Charles's published works (these are listed in the bibliography at the end) – systematics of Cucurbitaceae (1), systematics of Compositae (2), systematics of higher taxa (inter alia proposing the now universally accepted concept he called Streptophyta for the great lineage of Chlorobionta that includes the zygothytes, chlorophytes, Culeochaetes and embryophytes (3), taxonomic theory and nomenclature (4), and the conservation of nature and natural resources (5). The experience of many years teaching systematics to Kew's horticultural students is embodied in his introductory work on plant taxonomy (6). Charles was a founder member of the Conservation Society (now the Conservation Trust) and for many years

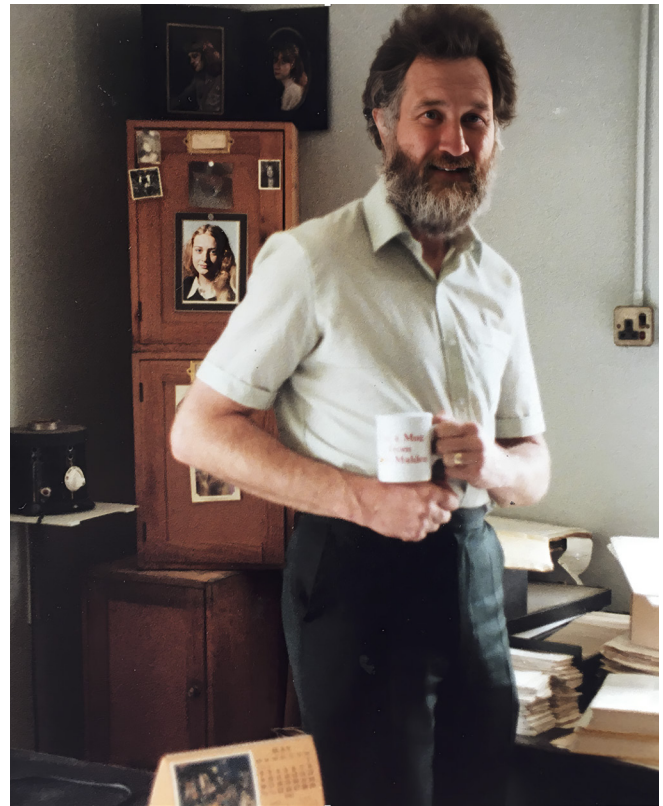


Figure 2. Charles in his office, top floor; Wing A, the Herbarium, RBG, Kew, in the 1980s. Photo courtesy of Helen and Linda Jeffrey.

was a supporter of the Field Studies Council.

In the course of his scientific work, Charles visited every continent except Antarctica, taking part in conferences or congresses in England, Scotland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Australia, Canada, the USA, China, Russia, and Japan, and collecting in Gabon (1957) (Figure 3), the Seychelles (1962-63)(7), Kenya (1963), Mongolia (1970) and Venezuela (1977). [Members of the University of Cambridge Gabon expedition included J. M. G. Davis (of Gonville and Caius college), M. Hayward (of Gonville and Caius college), J. Anton-Smith (of Gonville and Caius College), C. Jeffrey and D. Pomeroy (of Sidney Sussex College) and J. Davies (of St Catharine's College).] Among the conferences he helped to organize were those on the biology and utilization of the Cucurbitaceae (Ithaca, New York, 1980) and on the systematics, biology and utilization of the Compositae (Kew, 1994) in which 22 botanists from the countries of the former Soviet Union took part. Charles's connection with that country began in 1966, when he visited St

A Compositae Champion

Charles, in preparation for a 'country walk' in the 1970s

Photo courtesy of Helen and Linda Jeffrey



Figure 3. The 'Gabon Crew', from 1957. Guess which is Charles?!

Petersburg (then Leningrad) and Tashkent to study *Bryonia* and prepare a translation of a revised and augmented version of the second (1961) edition of Armen Leonovich Takhtajan's *Origin of Angiosperm Plants* (8). In 1977 he played a key role in securing for the Komarov Botanical Institute grants totalling \$1 million for renovation of its herbarium and library building. Perhaps fittingly, his last publication was an obituary of Armen Takhtajan (9).

CHARLES' REMINISCENCES & ANECDOTES

Charles noted that his first publications were *Aizoaceae sensu lato*, for the *Flora of Tropical East Africa* (FTEA), and a precursor paper in *Kew Bulletin*.

"I've also done a few odd jobs, e.g. Sapindaceae and Thymelaeaceae for my (as in DJNH) bugbear (i.e. Flora of Iraq) and a revision of Polygonatum in E. Asia. When the FTEA staff was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF) at Kew, I was put formally in charge of areas 3 & 4, although I continued to work on FTEA. How did I come to work on Cucurbits and Comps? Well, purely by chance. The people who were supposed to do these families for FTEA had decamped to (hopefully) greener pastures and there remained an enormous backlog of un-named specimens for these two 'orphan' families. Edgar Milne-Redhead, then in charge of the African section, just detailed me to do these jobs – the results you know."

"Another amateur interest is mycology, and I always enjoyed taking part in fungal forays. In fact,

I applied unsuccessfully for a MAFF post at Kew in the Mycology Section before applying for and obtaining the FTEA post, in favour of which I turned down an offer of a post in plant pathology at East Malling Research Station and an offer to work in palaeobotany at Reading University with Tom Harris."

One of Charles's favourite pastimes was country walking, or rambling as it is sometimes called (see image on [page 49](#)], first in SW Essex (centered on Epping Forest), then when living in New Malden on the chalk and greensand of Surrey and W Sussex, and generally in the mountains of the SW Scottish Highlands (the hinterland of Oban), the Lake District, and especially N Wales, where he walked all the peaks over 3000', the Moelwyns and his favourite mountain Moel Siabod; there he also once did a mountain marathon (where are those legs now?).

"North Wales also houses many examples of another of my passions – narrow gauge steam railways"

Charles was a life member of the Welsh Highland Light Railway, Porthmadog, Wales.

"As for anecdotes, well, just a few. When I came to Leningrad in 1966, the people at the Komarov had kindly booked me into an inexpensive hotel conveniently situated for travel to the institute. But I spent only one night there. The powers that be ruled that foreigners, especially capitalists like me, must stay in a more expensive hotel with a section especially put aside for them. So I had to move to the less conveniently situated 'Astoria'. The Komarov people had just overlooked this rule."

"A couple of anecdotes about China, 1980. The country had only just opened up to foreigners and there was a severe shortage of "interpreter-guides-policemen". When in Wuhan, I was allocated such a "keeper" and it soon became obvious that he knew very little English. "For what language are you really an interpreter?" I asked. "Russian" he replied. "No problem", said I. So we conversed in Russian for the few days I was in that city. Another demonstrates the flexibility of the Chinese language. From mainland China I went to Taiwan via Hong Kong. Taiwan would not admit you if you had a mainland China stamp in your passport, and vice versa. So for this trip I was provided with two UK passports. On arrival in Taipei,

I was at first puzzled by the street signs, until I realized that in mainland China, the ideograms had to be read from left to right, but in Taiwan, from right to left."

"A trip across the Irish Republic in 1956, to record plant distributions for the "Atlas of the British Flora" project provided of course (this being Ireland) some wry moments. At one pub, we arrived late and the landlord would not open the door for us. "If I let you in," he said, "the police will see and I would lose my licence". "You must come in by the back door." At another pub, one end of the bar was so high that even I, the tallest member of our party, found it difficult to place my glass upon it. "Why is it so high?" we asked. In reply we were told "the floor sank". One day we were looking for a place to camp and found a convenient field. On asking the farmer for permission he said "No, you cannot camp here, we have a very dangerous bull that might take exception to your



Figure 4. Charles and Margarita, in Richmond, December 2016. Photo courtesy of Helen and Linda Jeffrey.

tent.” we thought this was just a load of “bull” to refuse us permission, but he said “look, over there”, and true to tell, we saw an enormous bull in the next field. “But” we said, “We see you have a bull pen – why can’t he be in there?” “Oh, “, the famer replied, he (the bull) can’t stand being penned up. But if you care to camp in the bull pen, you would be safe”. So there we camped for the night.

“I also enclose a short biographical note published in 2005, which provides some other details [not least that Charles married Margarita Baranova on 17th September 2001, {at the Wedding Palace No. 2}, some 35 years to the day after they met – whilst Charles was researching on *Bryonia* (Cucurbitaceae) in the Komarov Institute and the Vavilov Institute of Plant Industry!] (Figure 4). I may add that in my time, I have served on a number of nomenclatural committees, for 1994-2006 I was a member of the editorial board of *Botanicheskii Zhurnal* and to this day am still a member of the editorial board of *Genetic Resources and Crop Plant Evolution*.

“Looking back, I consider that I was very fortunate to have such a varied and interesting career, and to have worked at Kew under mainly sympathetic governments and with adequate financing. Now we have an English Trump as P.M., much to the chagrin of the land (Scotland) of my father’s ancestors and things can only get worse. If I make 90, you can publish your piece as a celebratory contribution, not as a wake.

“With all best wishes from myself and Margarita.

“Charles.”

[June 2021]

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Clearly, the most conspicuous acknowledgement should be to Charles Jeffrey himself, as my patient line manager for nine years, correspondent for the last 27, and especially in supplying his handwritten short autobiography. I would also like to thank Helen, Linda and Martin Jeffrey in making a number of family photographs available for me to select from for this, and other (see Renner & Hind 2023),

obituaries of their father. Last but not least, I would like to thank Margarita for being Charles’s companion for the last 26 years, and for them both for being such generous hosts during a visit to St. Petersburg in 1998 (and Margarita’s late brother, an Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, for ensuring a memorable evening at the opera – in the ‘type locality’ for Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*).

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