

# JOURNAL OF THE TRINIDAD FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB 1957

Editorial

## THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, PORT-OF-SPAIN

ON Friday 12th July, 1957, two fine trees in the Royal Botanic Gardens were cut down as Government's first move in preparing a site within the gardens for the erection of a new governor's residence. The need for this building arose with the selection of Trinidad as the site for the capital of the West Indian Federation and the consequent conversion of Government House into the Governor-General's residence. The plan called for the appropriation of one third of the gardens but this initial act caused such a storm of protest that further work was suspended for some weeks. A committee appointed by Government then viewed the site and alternative sites which had been suggested and finally recommended that the new residence should go elsewhere.

Within a week of the appearance in the press of the news item which brought to light the proceedings in the gardens, the Honorary Secretary of the club, at the request of its Committee of Management, wrote a letter to the press pointing out the loss the community would suffer if the plan were carried out and further action was being contemplated when the committee's recommendation became known. It is appropriate at this time to review briefly the history and work of the Royal Botanic Gardens and the reasons why we think it important that no building project be allowed to encroach on them.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Port-of-Spain were founded in 1818 by Sir Ralph Woodford, then Governor of the colony and occupy about 60 acres of land in the immediate vicinity of Government House. They have the longest continuous history of any gardens in the West Indies. During the first hundred years of their existence, five curators did outstanding work in studying and recording the native flora. These are Lockhart (1818-1846), Purdie (1846-1857), Cruieger (1857-1864), Prestoe (1867-1887) and Hart (1887-1908). They established a great many trees and the appearance of the gardens today is largely due to them.

It was to these men that the people of the island turned for information about the native plants, for planting material of various kinds and for advice on the methods of dealing with problems of cultivation of economic crop plants. The increasing volume of work led to the formation of a Board of Agriculture in 1903 and a few years later to the establishment of the Government Department of Agriculture. Much of the work with economic crop plants was then taken over by the department and in 1930 the scientific and experimental work on plants of horticultural value, both useful and ornamental, was transferred to a separate station at St. Augustine. Thus, today the Royal Botanic Gardens are essentially a public park for most of the scientific work has been moved elsewhere. Nevertheless, the gardens still have scientific value: like every botanic garden it publishes a seed catalogue and distributes seed to other botanic gardens and it is an easily accessible source

of material for taxonomic studies. At the present time, specimens of leaves of all the palms are being prepared for shipment to Ghana for eventual transmission to Cambridge where they will be used for a complete reclassification of the palms. Inquiries for plants of suspected medicinal value are continually received.

The value of the gardens to local students of botany should not be overlooked. In the gardens the student may find in profusion living examples of the things he studies—leaves, flowers, fruits, bark, tendrils and so on—in an easily accessible place and conveniently grouped together so that comparisons are easy. A tour of the gardens should be an essential part of the botany course in all secondary schools in Port-of-Spain and even in other parts of the colony. Teachers in the colleges of Port-of-Spain are well aware of their usefulness and the gardens have often supplied material for use in classroom demonstrations.

Apart from their usefulness to scientist and student the chief value of the gardens lies in the function they perform as a public park. The city of Port-of-Spain is growing apace and pressing upon its confining hills to such an extent that it has not only spilled out into the neighbouring valleys but is steadily, and none too slowly, creeping up the hills themselves, including those along whose lower reaches the northern boundary of the gardens runs. The gardens are already a verdant oasis in the sprawling desert of concrete, brick and asphalt, a pleasant retreat where one may escape awhile from the hurly-burly of modern life. Their function in this respect is not unworthy of notice and is bound to increase in importance.

The execution of the original plan would have removed from public use about 20 acres. Because the proposed site was far removed from the Savannah Circular Road a long access driveway would have had to be built. This would have been an unwelcome intrusion of the city and would have removed forever the seclusion essential to the gardens.

It may be argued that the removal of 20 acres would not seriously affect either the scientific or the recreational value of the gardens. However, what has been done once could well be done a second time and the practice of appropriation, once begun, could well continue. This project could have been the beginning of the end of the gardens; it is worth nothing the manner in which it was launched. The ordinance which protects the plants from damage under penalty of summary conviction and a fine of \$48.00 was not repealed; Government was either unaware of it or simple ignored it.

The original plan called for the release of 27 acres of land for public use and the conversion of Government House into a museum when the Governor General eventually moved to his permanent residence in the capital of the Federation. Government has given no indication that it has sought advice about the suitability of the present Government House as a museum and though perhaps there is no other group that would so warmly welcome a new museum as would the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club, we should like to be assured that the building would serve its new purpose not only satisfactorily but efficiently. We cannot

help but ask ourselves if, as Government has claimed, the present building is unsuitable as a Governor's residence, the purpose for which it was built, is it likely that it will be suitable as a museum?

Having reviewed the past and the present we may go on to consider the future, and we shall do this in the light of the meaning and function of a botanic garden. In a recent article in *Tropical Agriculture*,\* J. W. Purseglove deals at some length with this topic and we can do no better than quote him. He says that "botanic gardens, to merit the name, are gardens maintained for the scientific study of the plants. As soon as this vital function is neglected botanic gardens change to public parks. This has been the fate of many botanic gardens throughout the tropics". Later on he states what sort of scientific work should be done. This includes establishment and maintenance of a living collection and a herbarium collection, naming and distribution of specimens, taxonomic and ecological studies. Again, we can do no better than quote his statements on the value of taxonomic research which, he says, "is of vital importance to the agriculturist, the forester and other applied scientists, as well as those who wish to assess and develop the natural resources of a country. Many people fail to realize the importance of giving plants their correct scientific names, so that their results can be understood in all countries regardless of the language used. Their research would often be of greater value if they took the trouble to ascertain the correct names of the plants they are working with, and in the case of plants not widely known, would lodge authentic specimens at some recognised institution for reference purposes. Anthropologists and others frequently write of plants used by indigenous people as food and medicine and in magic, etc., and are content to give vernacular names only, thus rendering their work nearly worthless for the botanist, chemist and others, who might well follow it up had they taken the trouble to collect specimens and get them properly identified". Although Purseglove lists horticultural research and educational work as other functions of a botanic garden it is clearly the taxonomic research which is of fundamental importance.

As mentioned above, the early curators of our Royal Botanic Gardens did much good work in collecting and naming the plants of the island. In the recent past, since the departure of R. O. Williams, this sort of scientific work has been neglected. We should like to see a return to a vigorous pursuit of taxonomic and ecological work and the gradual building up of the gardens into a first-class scientific centre with an adequate staff of trained botanists. As pointed out already, the gardens are important as a public park, but they would be immeasurably more important as a centre of scientific research. Possibly, had their true function been recognised during the recent past, the "Flora of Trinidad and Tobago" would be much nearer completion than it is at present.—V.Q.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the Zoological Society of London and thank the Editor of the *St. Mary's College Annual* for the use of the photograph of Fr. Graf.

*Trop. Agriculture, Trin.*, 34, 165, 1957.