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David Fairchild—a recollection

Elizabeth D. Kay

FEW HAVE been the scientists in any century privileged to visit the far reaches of the earth at will and to accomplish the dreams and objectives of their lives in so doing. One such fortunate man was Dr. David Fairchild, mycologist, entomologist, plant pathologist, geneticist, administrator, plant explorer extraordinary, author and, above all, humanitarian. Furthermore, among his other blessings David Fairchild experienced the greatest good fortune that can befall man or woman—that of finding and recognizing the perfect mate to share one's life and life's work.

Marian Bell Fairchild was the daughter of Alexander Graham Bell. She brought to her husband deep appreciation and devotion, a love of adventure and travel equal to his own, and the further gift of close association with her father. Between David and Dr. Bell developed a rare fellowship of mind and heart founded on mutual respect and an intense absorption in the entire world of science. Many years after Dr. Bell's death, David wrote, "Before me on my desk is the box of shot in which Mr. Bell kept his pens. As I look at it I can hear his marvelous voice and catch the spirit of his unparalleled imagination. I miss him terribly still!"

David Fairchild's warm, friendly personality attracted every individual or group with whom he met or became associated. His amazing blue-blue eyes, snow white hair and ready smile were as unforgettable as the effervescent enthusiasm with which he greeted each new day. David awoke each morning convinced that something wonderful was sure to happen, and for him it generally did! His enquiring mind found inspiration in any knowledge to be gleaned anywhere in the world, and endowed him with as keen an appreciation of the miracles in everyday things as of those evident in the more spectacular wonders of nature.

David described himself as having been a shy introvert in his earlier years. Actually, the shy youth never retreated far from the adult man, and seized control again whenever David found himself among overly sophisticated people, or hemmed in by buildings instead of the green world of flora and fauna. His kind heart saw only the best of everyone, and he felt a veritable

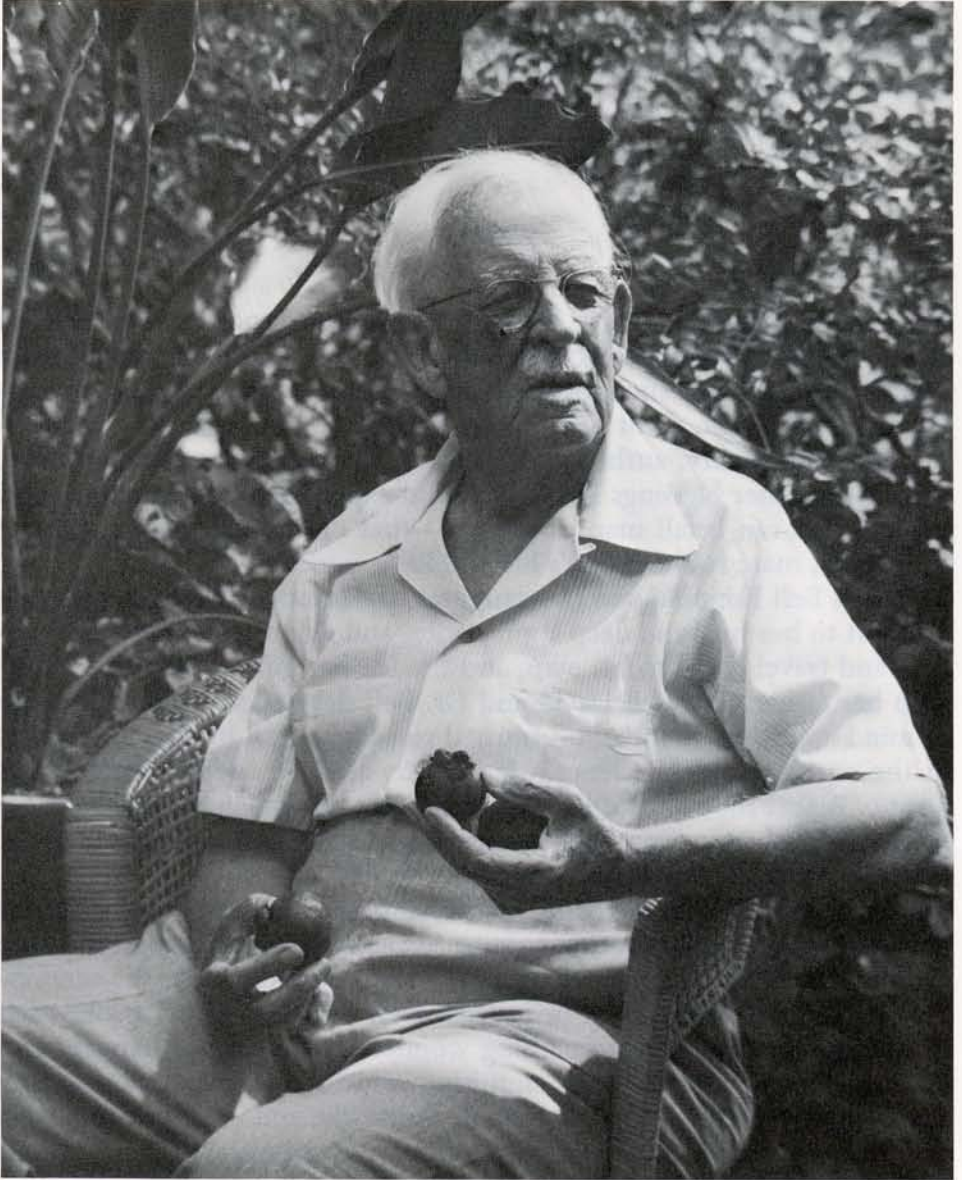


Fig. 13. David Fairchild

Photo by Klara Farkas, 1949

horror of gossip or destructive criticism. Among friends, or even among new acquaintances of kindred interests, he was the most outgoing and delightful of companions, completely unconscious of self, and equally eager to learn or to contribute knowledge. With children he was enchanting and a joy to watch as he excitedly fed their awakening interest in the world of living things. From his pocket he would produce a small magnifying glass for each child and, through its lens, introduce them to the marvels around them which are invisible to unaided eyes.

Those who knew the relaxed, normal David would have been amazed by the acute panic which overtook him at each request that he address an audience of any kind. Only after much persuasion would he unhappily consent. However, once on the platform, he would become so carried away by interest in his subject that he frequently needed a reminder when the allotted time was up. Consequently, David would arrange for a signal from Marian or some other understanding friend. Then, like the true absent-minded professor that he was, he generally failed to recognize the signal when it was given!

We have a vivid recollection of a lecture given by David in a Palm Beach auditorium before a large audience. Dr. Daniel J. McCarthy, an eminent neurologist from Philadelphia, agreed to warn David by coughing loudly when an hour had passed. At the proper moment, Dan indulged in a tremendous paroxysm which would have done credit to any operatic Mimi or Manon. Completely oblivious, David continued his discourse. A duet ensued, David talking, Dan coughing. Finally, with Dr. McCarthy quite apoplectic, the sound penetrated David's consciousness. Looking down at his exhausted friend, David extended his hand with a tumbler of water from the podium and said with great solicitude, "Do take a sip, Dan, it might help." To the delight of all present, Marian ended the matter by saying firmly, "David! Dan has been trying to make you stop talking, and I think you should!" With a helpless gesture David apologized to the audience, "I'm just a garrulous old man!"

As we look back on our lives, my husband and I, employing the perquisite of age to analyze and reconstruct, we date many treasured experiences from our first meeting with David and Marian Fairchild.

The organization of The Garden Club of Palm Beach in 1928 had so delighted David that he consented to come from Coconut Grove to speak to its members. It was a real excursion in those days, long before turnpikes or four-lane highways, and we in Palm Beach were duly impressed by his coming. Dr. Fairchild's name stood high in the realm of horticulture. In South Florida he held a unique position due to his efforts to awaken the

pioneering inhabitants of this newly settled land to a realization of the vast and exciting plant world at their command. This vital undertaking required patience and persistence for, in those days, new arrivals in South Florida were greeted with dire predictions; "Of course, my dear, one simply cannot grow any flowers! Roses are unthinkable; lawns impossible; summers unbearable; milk undrinkable." The only warning omitted from the recital was hurricanes. Until September, 1926, those phenomena were undreamed of!

David and Marian lunched with us before the meeting which was to be held at our house. Before the sun had set our world had been enlarged by many hundred thousand miles, and we had found two of the most wonderful friends who ever enriched the lives of lucky mortals.

In an unguarded moment during that delightful afternoon, Alfred and I agreed to collect and edit for publication the notes and writings of a German horticulturist named Henry Nehrling, recently deceased and completely unknown to us until then. Dr. Fairchild seemed to feel the undertaking to be extremely important and we were by that time so impressed by him that we accepted the job without question.

This constituted our horizon stretch number one. Before we proceeded far with the Nehrling papers, we found ourselves embarking upon a second project. We purchased a tract of land pronounced by Dr. Fairchild to be suitable for an experimental garden, and set forth to comb the nurseries of Florida in search of the rare plants which Dr. Nehrling had collected, grown, and written about, and which had been dispersed after his death. Also our "K-X Garden" began to fill with Fairchild as well as Nehrling genera and species.

This was a challenging time for garden lovers who had settled in South Florida. Not even David Fairchild felt certain as yet as to what would grow, or how to grow it. His faith was boundless in the future of the coastal strip north from the Keys for a hundred miles or so, and he used to describe it as, "the only tropical or subtropical area of continental United States." When one of those grim frosts descended like a plague of Egypt, David would mourn the damage to his beloved plants but remain positive that, as long as the Gulf Stream flows through the Florida Straits west of the Bahamas, most tropical species would survive once they attained sufficient maturity and root system. Both David and Dr. Nehrling viewed these recurring freezes objectively, and wrote voluminous notes about the effect of low temperatures upon various types of plants.

Our experimental arboretum, added to our work on the Nehrling MSS, created a strong bond between David, Marian, and ourselves. Gradually our mutual liking strengthened into admiration and deep affection. We

visited back and forth; came to know intimately each other's homes and families; and, soon constituted an integral part of each other's lives. We had endless fun together combined with a stimulating flow of conversation. David loved to be teased and his absent-mindedness provided many opportunities, as did his unworldliness and complete lack of any sense of direction. Incidentally, this last trait created motoring hazards, as well as his inability to talk without removing both hands from the wheel to gesture.

We also shared our friends, to everyone's apparent satisfaction. Thus Alfred and I met many of the noted travelers and scientists of the time, for one never knew who might appear at the lovely archway which gave access to "The Kampong." Liberty Hyde Bailey was frequently there, as was Dr. Baekeland, inventor of "Bakelite," Dr. Walter Swingle busily hybridizing citrus, Allison Armour, the Grosvenor family who lived next door and wandered in and out bringing Admiral Byrd or some other of the *National Geographic Magazine's* contributors. But the giant of all in both brain and six-foot-six stature was Dr. Thomas Barbour, head of Harvard's Peabody Museum, who spent weeks at "The Kampong" each winter. Certainly a *Reader's Digest* "Unforgettable Character," brilliant, erudite, irascible Tom not only did not "suffer fools" gladly, he did not "suffer" them at all. Woe betide those who uttered a dull or stupid remark. Promptly pulverized by scathing language, or by pregnant silence, one quite expected the offending speaker to disappear into thin air. Disappear they did of course, as quickly as possible.

David had an enormous respect for Tom Barbour whose vast learning and amazing memory were truly incredible. There were but few subjects about which Tom did not know a great deal and David would amuse himself trying to compute how many hundred thousand scientific names Tom had at his finger tips. An authority on reptiles and snails, equally at home in the fields of botany, entomology, archaeology, and anthropology, Tom was also well versed in literature and history. On the other hand, Tom's phobias were as enormous as his 300-pound frame. He frequently reminded me of the huge elephant in terror of a tiny mouse.

Many were the stories of Tom's collecting trips, not only jungle adventures, but also the devious machinations he resorted to in order to smuggle forbidden antiquities, reptiles, or plants into this country on his return. The hilarious tale of a large boa-constrictor undulating in and out among the curtained berths of an old-fashioned Pullman sleeper with Tom in stealthy pursuit, and the conductor in pursuit of Tom, had probably not reached the ears of his fellow members on the Harvard Board of Overseers when that august body, which has functioned since 1642, invited Dr. Barbour

to be President of Harvard University. This honor Tom refused, saying with considerable truth that he had neither the temperament for the office nor sufficient self-control to curb the zestful profanity with which he liberally colored his conversation. Still, one cannot but wish Harvard had experienced the drive and rare imagination Tom would have brought to University affairs.

It would be difficult to overestimate Tom Barbour's influence in the latter years of David Fairchild's life and certainly David brought much to Tom as well. In extraordinary degree the men were opposites, yet completely in tune with each other. Gentle, unassuming David thoroughly enjoyed Tom's brilliant mind and dynamic self-assurance, though David was made uncomfortable at times by Tom's strong language and lack of consideration for others. On the other hand, Tom would scold David for his lack of self-assertiveness, his interest in the common man, and his willingness to listen to all and sundry no matter what their education or station in life. Yet, in Tom's attitude to David there was always affection and a grudging admiration, and Tom was gentler and possibly less intolerant in David's presence. They constituted a fascinating study, these two men, as they debated some subject, David stemming from the Midwestern prairies with a background of modest means but fine academic heritage; Tom, New England to the core, born to wealth, position, and security.

While we were becoming amalgamated into the Fairchild *milieu*, our tedious work continued on the Nehrling notes, many written in indecipherable German script. David gave us constant counsel and encouragement and helped us to secure and select the illustrations. In the end, he was as happy as we when the results of our labors appeared in 1934 as a respectable book entitled *The plant world in Florida*, published by the Macmillan Company.

During the following years, David and Marian continued traveling to the far, and often unhealthy, corners of the earth. One spring, David returned from such a trip seriously ill with some strange infection. At Massachusetts General Hospital, even the doctors specializing in tropical medicine were unable to identify his syndrome or to cope with it. Nancy Bell Fairchild, their youngest daughter, was with us at Hidden River Farm in northern New Jersey when Marian telephoned, "David is in a coma. The doctors say they can do nothing more, and give me no hope. There is nothing you can do now, but please be ready to come to me when I call again."

For several horrible, anguished days, we wandered grief-stricken through the rooms, or around and around the kitchen-garden, our ears alerted for the call. Many thoughts were searing themselves into our minds. Not only was it appalling to think of life without David, but with him would go so

much knowledge which was his alone and which he had lacked the opportunity to record. If fate would relent and let him live, we pledged to ourselves that we would remedy this to the best of our ability.

And then the phone rang. I still remember the pounding of my heart as I raced in from the garden. I lifted the receiver and heard a sound quite unbelievable—Marian's voice singing with joy! "Elizabeth! Oh! Elizabeth! David has awakened from the coma! The doctor does not understand, but feels we may hope. I think he really believes David will get well!"

So, instead of journeying to Boston, we drove Nancy Bell to Lake George to join the other pupils of lovely Louise Homer, a wonderful woman as well as a world-famous contralto. Then we prepared our guest cottage at Watch Hill, Rhode Island, to receive David and Marian for his convalescence whenever he could leave Boston.

Toward the end of the summer David was strong enough to motor short distances, and we drove him to Goshen Point, south of New London, to meet and lunch with my "Uncle Ned" Harkness. As we expected, Uncle Ned and Aunt Mary were enchanted with David Fairchild and fascinated by the realization he brought to them of a vast world of knowledge and accomplishment new to them. How few of us pause to wonder from whence comes the wheat in the bread on our table, or the component parts of any staple food?

After luncheon, Uncle Ned drew me aside. "I would like to do something to help this extraordinary man. Which of his projects do you think he considers of most value?" This was so like Edward S. Harkness, the most modest, generous, and self-effacing of men! Only a few of his benefactions are known to the public.

I told Uncle Ned that Alfred and I felt David had been too ill to continue much hybridizing or plant importation—a statement which the future proved completely false—and explained our conviction that an account of David's lifework would be of real value and should be compiled. Furthermore, I said we believed the fascinating life David had lived might inspire other, younger men to follow in his footsteps and carry on his work. Certainly it seemed only right that David's many valuable contributions to American agriculture and horticulture should be recorded and made available for future "plant explorers" and scientists in related fields.

Uncle Ned was enthusiastic and immediately promised financial assistance if we would undertake the actual writing and responsibility of arranging for the book's publication. Thus, although over two years of thought and effort lay ahead before it emerged from the printing press of Scribner and Son, on that day, in August, 1936, was born *The world was my garden*, a

book which has gone through many editions and traveled to countries the world around.

David could not believe anyone would want to read about his life. However, we eventually convinced him that it was his duty to tell the story of the men who had worked for him in the Bureau of Plant Introduction and the valuable accomplishments of the Bureau. This he was happy to undertake and the account of the beginning of the Bureau soon led to a description of his own early years.

David and Marian came to Hidden River Farm, our home in northern New Jersey, to complete his convalescence. We secured an excellent stenographer who sat by his couch much in the manner of the modern psychoanalyst, jotting down in shorthand all his musings and remembering. When typed, the notes came to us. Each evening after dinner (the only meal David was allowed to attend) we would ply him with questions to amplify and clarify the notes. It was a labor of love but also a tremendously enriching experience. In the end, both David and Marian loved the book and were proud of it.

The world was my garden and the other delightful volumes written by David Fairchild, before and subsequently, are well known to dedicated lovers of the world of plants. Far less known are the myriad of scientific and popular articles he wrote, as well as his speeches and more formal addresses. These are scattered through a broad range of periodical literature from the *National Geographic* and the old *Youth's Companion* to publications of commercial concerns. Consequently, the compilation of this bibliography has been a dream cherished by many of us. Not until Dr. George H. M. Lawrence volunteered for the undertaking did its completion seem within the bounds of possibility. Dr. Lawrence approached his self-imposed task with dedication mingled, we fear, with trepidation as the magnitude of its scope has been borne in upon him. Beside the above-mentioned publications, David's letters, notes, and private papers were deposited some in Gainesville and others at the Fairchild Tropical Garden. All required study.

We hope that Dr. Lawrence has found satisfaction and interest to compensate him for the time and effort he has given to this valuable work which would make David Fairchild happy indeed.