

## HENRY OSMASTON: IN MEMORIAM

20 October 1922–27 June 2006



Henry Osmaston was known to many people for many reasons. He was a soldier, geographer, lecturer, mountaineer, forester, farmer and botanist—as well as being a family man and a very good friend to many of us. He was born in India, educated mainly in England, lived for 14 years in Uganda, and developed a strong interest in Ladakh, in northern Kashmir. He died near his Lake District

home on 27 June 2006.

Henry Osmaston's interests in natural history were equally broad, but in East Africa he will be best remembered for his contribution to the *Vegetation of Uganda*, popularly known as 'LB et al', which was written by Ian Langdale-Brown, Henry Osmaston and John Wilson, and published in 1964 by the Government Printer. It is particularly remarkable for the very detailed descriptions of more than 80 vegetation types, accompanied by large-scale maps of their distributions. These are still much-used today, since even now only about a third of Uganda is cultivated, and even cultivated areas often retain some patches of native vegetation. But he also collected plants in various parts of Uganda, and for example many records have come to the National Biodiversity Data Bank from the extensive 1952 Rwenzori expedition, one of many that he joined. His interests in the Rwenzoris continued to grow, and before long had come to include the glaciers, and the geological history of the whole area. He collected samples of peat from the many bogs in the mountains and, years later in Oxford, analysed them to reveal much of the changes in climate and vegetation in past times. This work was rewarded by a D Phil from the university, and his appointment as a senior lecturer in the department of Geography at Bristol.

Henry had come to Uganda as District Forest Officer. After tours in Busoga and Nyebeyya he was posted to Toro, where he lived within sight of the Rwenzoris, which became one of his great loves for the rest of his life. It was perhaps inevitable that Henry would become a forester, as several of his family had been foresters in India, and it was also inevitable that he would have an adventurous streak, because the same relatives were also keen naturalists and hunters, killing man- (and in one case woman-) eating tigers and bears as part of their duties. But his early life was typical of colonial families of those times. He was sent to England for his education, which was to be the best one could then get, including Eton College and Oxford University; but his degree was interrupted by the second world war. In the army he served in England and the Middle East, rising to the rank of Major before dropping back to undergraduate life in Oxford.

Idiosyncrasies seem to be a characteristic of the Osmastons, ever since the days of Henry's great-grandfather, a wealthy industrialist in Derbyshire named Wright, who built the village of Osmaston and a monumental manor with railway in the cellars and water powered lifts to carry coal to the bedrooms, but whose less businesslike son (Henry's grandfather) galloped around Russia with gold sovereigns and pistols in lieu of passport, lost the family fortune, moved to Sussex, and changed the family name to Osmaston. So all living Osmastons are cousins of some degree. And no less than eight of them were foresters.

Between graduating with a degree in Forestry, and travelling to Uganda, Henry married Anna Weir; whilst in Uganda, they had three daughters and a son. Life in Uganda was very different in the last years of colonial government. A DFO in Fort Portal was a long way from Entebbe, the departmental headquarters, and hence had plenty of opportunity for independent action, since communications were slow. The Osmastons in fact lived some distance from the town, in their own house. There were no government vehicles for such officers; one bought one's own, and claimed a (very modest) mileage allowance for its use when—and only when—on official duty. Leave was fairly generous, but mostly local, and the Rwenzoris saw frequent visits from Henry and Anna.

He spent time in other districts of Uganda, became Senior Assistant Conservator of Forests, in Entebbe, then Mbale and finally Kampala with extensive travels. These were planned to develop Working Plans for the forests, whose purpose was not only to provide timber on a sustainable basis (there is nothing new about that idea!) but also to conserve water and wildlife—to which end, most forests had Nature Reserves.

The colonial period saw the training of Ugandans in forestry at all levels, helped by the establishment of the Forestry College at Nyebyeya—Henry was involved with that too, of course. Thus, most expatriate foresters left soon after independence. Sadly, the kinds of government in Uganda for the next decades did not give the Forest Department much of a chance to show its capabilities, but eventually the benefits of sound training began to be realised and professional attitudes began to take effect. Meanwhile Henry, having completed his D Phil bought a rundown dairy farm and took up the post already mentioned at Bristol where he remained until he retired in 1988 hoping to find time to do what he never had time to do before. Of course, he did not retire in any real sense; he undertook professional consultancies, many expeditions to India, China, Tibet, and Uganda, only starting on the Ethiopian glaciers at 80, and producing several publications each year, the last, only a week or so before he died, of the second edition of the *Guide to the Rwenzori—The Mountains of the Moon*.

Henry had 9 grand children and is survived by his wife Anna, and their four children.

*Derek Pomeroy*