

William Trowbridge Merrifield Forbes

April 23, 1885 — April 12, 1968

William Trowbridge Merrifield Forbes was born in Westborough, Massachusetts, on April 23, 1885, the son of William T. and Harriet Forbes (nee Merrifield). He was the elder brother of the late author, Esther Forbes. His father served for many years as Judge of the Probate Court of Worcester.

He attended Westborough and Worcester schools and was graduated from Amherst College in 1906 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. He was a student at Cornell during 1908-09, and he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Clark University in 1910, with William Morton Wheeler as the chairman of his examination committee. Between 1906 and 1908 he was an instructor in biology at Roberts College in Constantinople; in 1910-11 he was an instructor in zoology and entomology at Rutgers College, working with Professor John B. Smith. After his retirement from Cornell he was, for a semester, a Visiting Professor in the Department of Entomology of the University of Arizona. This gave him the opportunity to see the deserts and mountains of the Southwest and to work with material from the area.

In 1915 he joined the staff of the Department of Entomology at Cornell as an assistant; in 1921 he became an instructor; in 1943, an Assistant Professor; in 1950, an Associate Professor; and in June of 1953, Professor Emeritus. During World Wars I and II he served as an instructor in the Department of Physics in the S.A.T.C. programs. He stayed on at Cornell until the fall of 1954 at which time he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to continue his research studies at the Museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard University and to be near the members of his family who reside in and near Worcester. In 1964 his health began to fail, and in January 1966 he entered the Hermitage Nursing Home in Worcester. There he had the freedom to come and go, and thus could indulge in the long rambles that he so used to enjoy. He died at the Hermitage on April 12, 1968.

During his long association with Cornell and the Entomology Department, he made many contributions, especially to the departmental library. He spent a considerable sum of his personal money on building the Lepidoptera Collection. His final contribution upon leaving Cornell was a substantial gift to the Department to be used for graduate students and projects related to their work.

Dr. Forbes made two long collecting trips to the American tropics in 1920 and in 1927. The 1920 trip was made with Dr. J. Chester Bradley and started in Peru, ending at the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil. The 1927 trip was made to Surinam and British Guiana. He also made a short trip to the island of Puerto Rico. He visited the British

Museum of Natural History three times in conjunction with attendance at some of the international congresses of entomology.

Although he described himself as a “biologist interested in the Lepidoptera,” he was really the last of the great general workers in the order, and his command of the field was unrivaled. He was perhaps most interested in the geographical distribution and classification of butterflies, but there was no area in which he had not read or on which he had not formed, as he called them, “impressions.” He published approximately 150 scientific papers on insects; the majority are on the morphology and classification of butterflies and moths. His most outstanding contribution, the only one of its kind on the North American Lepidoptera, was the *Lepidoptera of New York and Neighboring States*, published in four parts. This will remain for a long time the definitive work on Lepidoptera of the northeastern fauna, and it will stand as a monument to his knowledge of the group.

His accomplishments and interests outside the field of entomology were many: the main ones were in the psychology of vision on which he published; the Near Eastern archaeology, especially the written record of past cultures.

He was a member of a number of scientific societies and served as president of the Lepidopterists’ Society in 1953. Later he was elected an honorary life member of that Society.

He was a critic of the Cornell administration and especially of those administrators having jurisdiction over the grounds in their approach to the management of the areas of potential value as biological reserves on and near the campus. His demand was that some of the areas should be left “natural,” that is, “unmanaged.” His most pungent remark on the conditions was that the shield of the University should show a “steam-shovel rampant”; today it would be a bulldozer.

Dr. Forbes’s rapport with students was excellent, and he was much sought after for advice and for comments on work in progress. He could often suggest some reference work that should be consulted or some points that should be considered. He always had time for a discussion. Some of the most delightful times during graduate study were those spent with him in late evening discussions which ranged over many subjects. He was a kindly man, considerate, friendly, and gentlemanly. He was without affectation, modest, and approachable to all, regardless of rank.

He is survived by two sisters, Miss Cornelia B. Forbes and Mrs. Katherine Erskine; a brother Alan W. Forbes; and nieces and nephews.

William L. Brown, Jr. Robert L. Clausen, John G. Franclemont