

# Lester Whyland Sharp

*April 21, 1887 — July 17, 1961*

It was a most fortunate coincidence that the period during which Dr. Lester W. Sharp devoted a lifetime of service to Cornell University as a distinguished professor of cytology included the years in which this long-established science became allied with the rapidly developing new sciences of genetics and cytogenetics. His contributions to this alliance as a teacher and investigator were indeed very significant.

Born at Saratoga, New York, April 21, 1887, Dr. Sharp moved at an early age with his family to Alma, Michigan and completed his undergraduate training at Alma College in 1908. After spending the next two years in graduate study at Johns Hopkins University he transferred to Chicago where he specialized in plant morphology and received a Ph.D. in 1912. The following year was spent in travel abroad and in six months of study with Professor Victor Grégoire at the University of Louvain.

Dr. Sharp joined the staff of the Department of Botany in the College of Agriculture as an instructor in 1914, the year following the formation of the department and Dean Liberty Hyde Bailey's appointment of Professor K. M. Wiegand as head. Promoted to Assistant Professor in 1915 and to Professor in 1920, Sharp served continuously until his retirement in 1947 after thirty-three years of distinguished service to the University. Shortly thereafter he moved to Nuevo, California, where he lived in quiet retirement with Mrs. Sharp, close to the home of his sister, until his death July 17, 1961.

Soon after coming to Cornell, Dr. Sharp organized one of the first courses in plant cytology to be offered in an American university. His *Introduction to Cytology*, published in 1921, was the first American textbook of cytology with primary emphasis on the plant cell. Considered the standard textbook of plant cytology for many years, numerous editions were printed and a German translation was issued in 1931. Sharp's *Fundamentals of Cytology* was written in 1943, primarily for use as an elementary text, and a Spanish edition was published from Buenos Aires in 1947. In addition to his textbook, Sharp was the author of numerous scientific papers on embryogeny, spermatogenesis, and chromosome structure in plants. Most of these publications appeared early in his scientific career, his Ph.D. thesis being his ninth publication. Thereafter his efforts were devoted chiefly to teaching and the publication of his textbooks of cytology.

Professor Sharp's excellent reputation as a teacher was based on his extraordinary grasp of the literature of cytology and the new science of cytogenetics at a time when rapid growth was taking place in these fields. His critical

evaluation of new contributions was based on a broad background of knowledge in his own and related fields. Sharp's lectures and publications were models of orderly arrangement and of lucid, concise presentation, reflecting meticulous care in their preparation.

In addition to his classroom and laboratory teaching, Dr. Sharp made a great contribution through his personal conferences with his students. He was always available for conferences with those who came to him for help and was generous with his time when serving in various advisory capacities. His gracious manner and pleasing personality made the student's visit a most pleasant occasion.

Membership in honorary societies included Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi, and the Gamma Alpha scientific fraternity. He was vice president of the American Society of Naturalists in 1924, secretary of the Program Committee of the International Botanical Society of America in 1929 and president in 1930. He was a member of the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Botany*, of *Stain Technology*, and the *Botanical Review*. He received an honorary degree from Alma College in 1930 and from the University of Louvain in 1947—the highest distinction to be awarded by one of the oldest and botanically most distinguished European universities.

As examples of Sharp's unusual diversity of nonscientific accomplishments may be cited his presentation in blank verse of his address as retiring president of the Botanical Society of America (commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of Robert Brown's discovery of the nucleus); his co-authorship with a student of *Eoörnīs pteroveloxy gobiensis*, a masterful scientific hoax; and his love of classical music shared with students and colleagues.

During this active scientific career Professor Sharp's influence stimulated many promising young scientists to concentrate their efforts in the broad field of cytogenetics, where their brilliant researches have contributed substantially to the spectacular progress which has been and is continuing to be achieved in this field.

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