

CORNELIS ANDRIES BACKER (1874—1963). IN MEMORIAM

On February 22nd, 1963, the Rijksherbarium suffered a severe loss by the passing away of its honorary officer, since 1945, Dr C. A. Backer, at the age of 88 years. His death came by no means unexpected. He had been ailing and largely bed-ridden for nearly two years; while his mental capacities remained unaffected almost up till the last day, his body suffered from an increasing weakness of the limbs, an increasing deafness and loss of eyesight. Not suffering from pain, he endured the weakening of his body with courage and resignation, token of his indomitable spirit.

As two biographies, one provided with a full bibliography ¹⁾, and an obituary note ²⁾ are published elsewhere, the accent of the present obituary lies largely on the way in which his work became involved with that of the Rijksherbarium.

The primordia of this collaboration started already long before the war, and in fact its roots are to be found in the coming of Backer to Java, as a primary school-teacher at Djakarta, in 1901.

Born at Oudenbosch, in 1874, as the son of a school-teacher, he was gifted with a sharp intelligence and a remarkable memory, paired with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Having in Holland already acquired teaching certificates for Mathematics, French, and English, he ventured also on classic languages. Prof. Lam, to whom I am indebted for first-hand information, found in his private library amongst others a copy of Dante's *Inferno* (date of purchase 1900) of French translation (with the original Italian) and Horace's *Odes* (date of purchase 1904).

His main interest was, however, floristic, an interest he had already acquired in Holland. I remember having seen formerly a critical plant list of the vicinity of Werkhoven where he was once a school-teacher. This early choice of *scientia amabilis* was decisive for the remarkable botanical career of this self-taught man.

He pursued the subject of Javanese botany first by private means in the vicinity of Djakarta, acquainting himself thoroughly with the lowland flora. Untired, he spent all his spare time on many excursions in the sticky climate of the coastal region and the rice-fields. By borrowing books and seeking information from the Bogor Botanic Gardens he soon attracted attention of its scientific staff and through the intermediary of Melchior Treub he became in 1905 attached to the Bogor Herbarium. From then on he could more freely develop his work which remained concentrated on the Flora of Java, with the ultimate aim to make a complete work. In the course of the following twenty years several (precursory) books appeared as his knowledge increased and MSS were judged ready for the press: 'Flora of Batavia' (1 vol. 1907), 'Voorloper' (1911), 'Schooflora voor Java' (1 vol. 1911), 'Handboek voor de Flora van Java' (3 parts), (1924—1928), all in the Dutch language. He managed also to assemble a huge well-annotated herbarium collection in the island of Java and the adjacent islands of Madura and Kangean.

¹⁾ R. C. Bakhuizen van den Brink Jr in: C. A. Backer & R. C. Bakhuizen van den Brink Jr, *Flora of Java* 1 (1963) xi—xxiii, photogr., bibliogr.

H. J. Lam, *ibid.*, Preface ix—x and Postscript xxiii—xxiv.

C. G. G. J. van Steenis, *Taxon* 12 (1963) 173—177, photogr.

²⁾ C. G. G. J. van Steenis, *Vakbl. Biol.* 43 (1963) 65—66.

Backer also served the public in Java in several other ways by stimulating amateurs through the journal 'De Tropische Natuur', the official organ of the Netherlands Indian Natural History Society. He also stimulated students by lecturing botany in the Veterinary and Agricultural Colleges at Bogor.

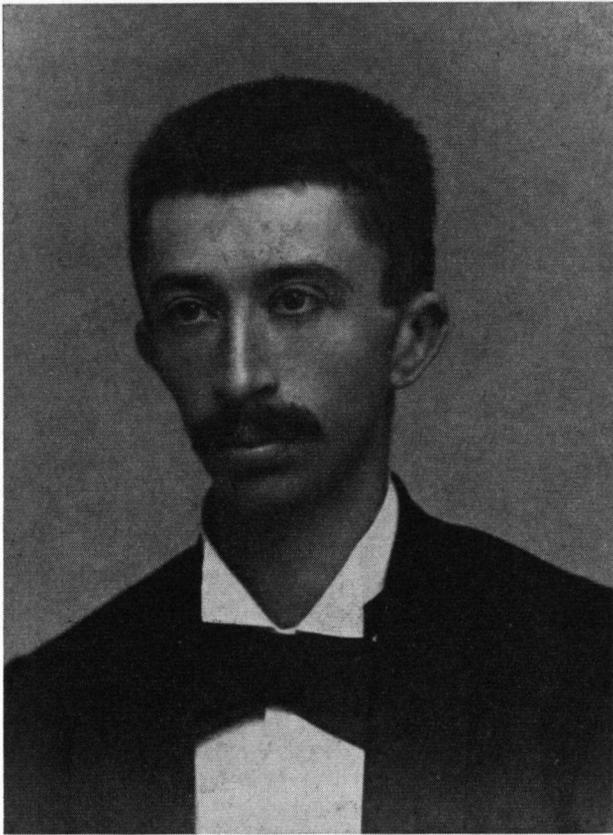
He was keenly aware of the importance of taxonomical information towards agricultural and economic botany and he made invaluable generous contributions to put economic botany on its feet. He is responsible for the botanical skeleton of the standard work by K. Heyne, 'De Nuttige Planten van Nederlandsch Indië' (1927), and published exemplary critical books on the weeds of tea estates (with Van Slooten): 'Handboek der Theeonkruiden' (1924) and sugarcane soils 'Onkruidflora der Javasche Suikerrietgronden' (1928—1934).

Backer was keenly interested in the ecology of plants, both to soil and climate, and sociology, but he wanted these data largely for his flora, and not so much for adding insight to the theory of these disciplines. I got often the impression that he was afraid of generalisations because these will never take care of every detail. This appears for example from the way in which he refused to assume dispersal if it was not proved, as if we could ever prove such in nature in detail. Primarily he remained the floristic botanist with limited purpose, but in this field he was unsurpassed in power of acute observation and assembling accurate factual data, which make his works a mine of information.

His main purpose remained the completion of the Flora of Java. He pursued this with fanaticism; going so far that he properly used to measure his esteem of fellow botanists and botanical institutions by the degree and quality by which they contributed to the knowledge of Javanese plants. This critical one-purpose outlook led sometimes to praise, but sometimes to friction, in which his criticism was unnecessarily sharply formulated, for example his criticism on Koorders' 'Exkursionsflora von Java' which he deemed below all standards and a degradation of scientific work (1913). Though all botanists have become aware that this work should never have been published, all will agree that this sort of fanatic criticism is also below all standards of a critic. A similarly hardly fair criticism can be tasted in the only book he ever published in English, viz on Krakatao (1929) the main theme of which was to show that it was unproved, and unlikely, that the flora of this island was entirely destroyed in 1883.

After his final retirement in Holland he felt attracted to work out a list of derivations of generic names and epithets primarily intended to be included in the sugarcane flora. This 'Verklarend Woordenboek' (1936) finally included entries to all names and epithets of both the flora of the former Netherlands Indies and the Netherlands. It is an invaluable work, meticulously accurate in detail — as all his works — and shows the great erudition of its author. In the same year Backer was made a honorary doctor by the University at Utrecht, an honour well-deserved.

Having finished this sideline, he again concentrated on the Flora of Java and re-arranged his MSS and continued the revision of plant families of Java. At Bogor we regularly received duplicates intended for testing them and requests to make revisions for his Flora. In these post-slump years (1935—1939) the decimated staff of the Bogor Herbarium could not do much more than pointing his attention to small emendations and new records, Dr Boedijn being working on Fungi, Dr van Slooten holding office and revising Dipterocarpaceae, and myself acting as curator and being primarily interested in preparations for the Flora Malesiana. This led to similar complaints on lack of collaboration from the Bogor Herbarium, as he had in the twenties ushered against the Rijksherbarium when he was in Java and Prof. Lam had not yet led the Rijksherbarium towards research work on Malaysian botany. From his standpoint the complaints could as easily be



C. A. Backer, about 1906.

understood as they were quickly forgiven, as all of us were jealous of his knowledge, admired his courage to perform this colossal task with unsurpassed accuracy of detail.

Then, in 1939, the beginning of the Second World War changed the situation and there came an intimate relation between Backer and the Rijksherbarium. In a way it stimulated the work of completion, and even this might never have been achieved, were it not that Dr Backer and Prof. Lam, although they had never been close friends at Bogor, cautiously approached one another. Backer recognized obviously that notwithstanding his industry, his perfectionism regarding details prevented him from working quickly, and further that there should be an official instance where the fruits of his labours should be as much safe-guarded as circumstances permitted. Prof. Lam shared the feelings of safe-guarding and besides, wisely judged that without collaboration from the Rijksherbarium Backer would not be able to finish his life-work. The co-operative task was started in August 1940 when it was decided that all MSS should be edited by the Rijksherbarium in a stencilled 'Nooduitgave' (emergency edition) in the Dutch language; this was continued after the war, the final, 20th part, appearing in 1961. In 1945 Dr Backer became officially a honorary scientific officer of the Rijksherbarium and Prof. Lam succeeded in attracting various temporary staff members working under Backer's direction, the principal collaborator being Dr R. C. Bakhuizen van den Brink Jr, who became finally responsible for the English translation which could be financed thanks to the loyal co-operation of the Foundation for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.).

His life-work being in able hands in the early fifties Dr Backer contributed several revisions to the Flora Malesiana, which he thoroughly enjoyed; its greater scope gave him much satisfaction. When his eyesight failed him to dissect plants any longer under the binocular, in the midst of his work on Loganiaceae, his industrious mind switched towards another colossal task. He then set himself to compose an 'Adminiculum', being a manual of phytography for the use of systematists, the MS of which was completed before he grew too ill to work any longer. This is now in the hands of Prof. H. C. D. de Wit at Wageningen for eventual publication with English versions of a Latin grammar for botanists, and extending the etymological dictionary of names of the whole of the palaeotropics.

Nobody who came into contact with Backer's vivacious personality could remain indifferent: he was a 'character', and the very opposite of a dull man. He was tall and lean with slender limbs and a narrow face. The frontispiece reproduced here shows him in his early years in Java. One could have a good laugh with him, but his witticisms were not rarely at the cost of others and could sometimes lead to almost sarcastic criticism. His manner of speaking was rapid, with numerous abrupt breaks, during which he looked around to see the effect of his words. With his rather small, keen, glittering and piercing eyes, his lively and expressive face, and sparkling conversation, he enjoyed to be the centre of a group of listeners. In his work he had become accustomed to trust no other authority than his own eyes and intelligence and every written sentence in his works was carefully considered and reconsidered, before he deemed it worthy to be published as a contribution to science. This led this self-centred, gifted, passionate man to a sort of general over-estimation of intellect and power of observation; he had no pity or sympathy for lame ducks among the human species which was not seldom painful to more tolerant persons who considered that, after all, the essence of a person's mentality is largely the result of inborn potentialities, not made by himself, for which he can hardly be blamed nor praised; there may be reason for satisfaction in intellect and other gifts, but no pride or boasting of qualities inherited by birth due to the Grace of the Almighty whatever this may mean.

C. G. G. J. VAN STEENIS