

PROFESSOR ARTHUR HUGH BUNTING, CMG

Hugh Bunting was born in Johannesburg, South Africa on 7 September 1917 and died peacefully in his sleep at his home in Caversham, Berkshire on 8 May 2002.

Hugh Bunting devoted his life to the advancement and application of biological science for the benefit of mankind, particularly in Africa, and he enjoyed many successes.

He was born into a family politically active in the advancement of South Africans who were disadvantaged because of their race. In 1933, his final year at Athlone High School, Hugh decided to apply his life to that same cause. He declined the opportunity to make a career in medicine and instead entered the University of the Witwatersrand to read botany. In 1938 he graduated with both BSc. Honours and an MSc.

He was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship for the Transvaal for 1938 and entered Oriol College, Oxford. Hugh worked in the Botany School under Dr W.O. James on the biochemical pathways of glycolysis in barley seedlings and was awarded his D.Phil. degree in 1941. In that year he was appointed to the Rothamsted Experimental Station. The Director was Sir John Russell who led a very distinguished team of agricultural scientists, including Fisher and Yates, Penman, Haldane, Nutman, Pirie and Bawden. Hugh was assigned to work under Dr E. M. Crowther on the agronomic effects of bulky organic manures and during this time he assimilated much of the current philosophy and methods of modern agricultural research.

After the war ended in 1945 Hugh wanted to return to Africa and in 1947 he was appointed Chief Scientific Officer of the Overseas Food Corporation's Groundnuts Scheme in Tanganyika (now the mainland part of Tanzania). The Scheme failed partly through having to start in Kongwa, the least favourable area, but mainly as a result of the premature decision in London to proceed to large-scale mechanised operations before the fundamental scientific and technical testing could be completed. Hugh's team of 35 professional staff contributed significantly to the knowledge of growing groundnuts and several other crops under rainfed agriculture in the semi-arid tropics. Nonetheless, the disastrous results of the grand Scheme reflected badly on all

concerned, even the scientists who were doing excellent work.

Hugh left Tanganyika in 1951 and, after some difficulty with an official in the Colonial Office, secured an appointment in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan whose links with Britain were through the Foreign Office. He was appointed a Senior Research Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture and posted to develop the Central Rainlands Research Station at Jebel Tozi. The area was traversed by seasonal transhumants who grazed their herds of bovines, camels, sheep, goats and donkeys between the drier north and the wetter south, using a well managed customary system of wells and run-off tanks to water their annual migrations.

Hugh's team devoted themselves to developing the agronomy of sorghum, bulrush millet, maize, sesame, safflower, groundnuts and short-staple cotton. Their work produced excellent results and from these a flourishing sorghum industry was developed. This period was one of the happiest in Hugh's long life and it was with great regret that family reasons obliged him to leave the tropics.

The Bunting family returned to England in 1956, after which Hugh was appointed to the Chair of Agricultural Botany at the University of Reading. His teaching, based largely on his African experience, inspired many of us to the extent that in 1957 thirteen finalists applied to join the Colonial Agricultural Service. Twelve were awarded Colonial Office Probationerships tenable first at the University of Cambridge and then at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad. This was by far the biggest entry from a single university. The ICTA graduating class of 1959 produced the best results in the history of the College and the Secretary of State for the Colonies rewarded them generously. Many of Hugh's former students have gone on to enjoy distinguished careers and at least two have become Vice-Chancellors.

Throughout his time at Reading, up to and after his official retirement from the University in 1982, Hugh worked on two fronts; first, enhancing the University's already strong reputation in agricultural science and technology, and secondly in helping to advance the agriculture of the developing world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

He was elected to an unprecedented second consecutive term as Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Food and held the Deanship from 1965 to 1971. During this time he built up strong working relations with several major research organisations that became formal Associated Institutions of the University. These included Rothamsted, Kew, Long Ashton, CABI, and Jealott's Hill, with their chief officers becoming Visiting Professors of the University. Hugh was instrumental in strengthening the University's capability in biometry, leading to the creation of a strong Department of Applied Statistics. He forged strong linkages between those departments that were engaged in various aspects of pure and applied botany and housed them, together with the industrial research unit of Tate and Lyle in a new and very efficient laboratory building. Above all, Hugh sought to develop further the Faculty's competence in tropical agriculture. He did this by attracting to Reading people with experience of the tropics at a senior level. At one point, out of the thirteen full professors in the Faculty eight had spent a significant part of their careers in the tropics.

Hugh toiled as hard overseas as he did in Reading. His many years of work for Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria were recognised with an Honorary LL.D degree; as a white South African this pleased him greatly. Also in Nigeria, he was active in the creation of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in 1965. Thirty-seven years later, IITA immediately lowered its flags to half-mast on learning of Hugh's death.

On the other side of Africa, 1967...

On the other side of Africa, in Kenya, Hugh was a member of the 1967 Agricultural Education Commission, which *inter alia* caused the University of Nairobi to establish a Faculty of Agriculture. During the Faculty's formative year Hugh developed an agricultural curriculum to meet Kenya's current and anticipated needs and served as the Faculty's representative in Europe where he succeeded in recruiting a first class team of founding professors for the new Faculty. In Trinidad Hugh similarly assisted the former ICTA, now the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of the West Indies, in developing a curriculum geared to the specific needs of the Caribbean.

Through his work with the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research Hugh was much involved with the activities of the

International Board for Plant Genetic Resources. A student in the University of Reading's Department of Typography designed IBPGR's attractive logo.

Hugh's clash with officialdom in the Colonial Office in 1951 was forgotten by 1971 when he was awarded the CMG for his services to international agriculture. In 1974 funds were found by ODA (forerunner of DfID) to enable the University of Reading to create an *ad personam* Chair in Agricultural Development Overseas, and Hugh held this post until his retirement in 1982.

His two decades of retirement kept Hugh busy in all sorts of ways. He continued to teach students on the MSc. course in Tropical Agricultural Development which the University developed, after the dissolution of ICTA, to meet a continuing demand from British graduates for an introductory course in tropical agriculture. Over the years the course has attracted increasing numbers of international students. He also continued to lecture at the Royal College of Defence Studies on global questions of population, agriculture and food.

founding member of TAA...

Hugh was an active founding member of the Tropical Agriculture Association that honoured him, on his retirement, with Life Membership. The Association of Applied Biologists, of which he was President in the sixties, similarly honoured him.

Hugh had a warm and engaging personality. He enjoyed a party and always ensured that his conferences were as good on the social side as they were in purpose and intellectual content. His two world conferences on 'Change in Agriculture' were particularly notable in this regard. He cared deeply for the less fortunate members of the world's population and was always striving to improve their lot. The developing world, and especially Africa, has lost one of its most talented and devoted supporters.

Hugh is survived by his wife, Muriel, and their sons Robert, Edward and Daniel.

David Betts

TAA Newsletter, Sept 2002