

# Arthur Lister, 1830-1908

## A REVIEW

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**A**RTHUR LISTER, F.R.S., F.L.S., is the subject of an obituary notice appearing in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, 1915, by his son, Joseph Jackson Lister, F.R.S., Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge.

Arthur Lister was the youngest son of Joseph Jackson Lister, F.R.S., the London Quaker wine merchant who discovered "the true principle on which compound lenses should be constructed." His older brother, Joseph, the late Lord Lister, was a President of the Royal Society. The brothers grew up in the strict atmosphere of a Quaker home, but with "the breath of a larger and cultivated world in the environment."

From Isaac Brown's school at Hitchin, and Grove House School, Tottenham, Arthur Lister, as was customary with Friends in his young days, was put straight to business. He had, however, acquired literary, artistic, musical and scientific tastes, and was a keen sportsman. The use of gun and rod soon "passed more and more into the background" as the pursuit of natural history became the absorbing interest of the leisure of one whose business life was active. He succeeded his father in 1857 in the firm of Lister & Beck, of Tokenhouse Yard, London, being "a representative of the fourth generation of his family in this firm." He married, in 1855, Susanna Tindall, and soon afterwards settled at Leytonstone, on the edge of Epping Forest.

Throughout his life he was an "enthusiastic ornithologist." It is safe to say that no one had a better knowledge of the birds of Epping Forest. He was ever "alert to the doings and songs of birds," and had an exceptional power, as long as his hearing remained acute, "of recognising birds by their notes." His chief scientific work lay, however, in another direction. Commencing with the study of flowering plants, he passed on to the British mosses, with which he had made some acquaintance in his school days under Isaac Brown. Examining these microscopically, he made "exquisite water-colour drawings" of his specimens "with the aid of the camera lucida," and he habitually recorded the results of his investigations in this way. He extended his work to the study of lichens and then to moulds and other fungi, inventing a means of recording the arrangement of the gills and colour of the spores by placing the fungi under a glass in such a way that the spores fell on blotting paper.<sup>1</sup> Whilst working at moulds and fungi, Arthur Lister entered upon his investigations of the Mycetozoa, then classified with fungi, but now "regarded as a group of Protozoa." For the rest of his life, assisted by his daughter Gulielma, these minute organisms became the chief objects of his careful and skilful research. The results obtained were methodically recorded by "ledger" entries and accurate drawings, and in 1892 he was requested

<sup>1</sup> A similar idea was suggested to the writer of this notice by Till Adam Smith, of Weston-super-Mare, nearly fifty years ago.

by Mr. William Carruthers, of the Botanical Department of the British Museum, "to prepare a Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections of the Mycetoza in the Museum." To this collection were added by presentation "samples mounted on slides of all the species and varieties known to him . . . with beautiful water-colour drawings by his daughter, giving magnified views of the typical specimens of the group."

Arthur Lister's scientific bent did not prevent his giving much of his time during many years to affairs connected with the Society of Friends,<sup>2</sup> to philanthropic work and foreign travel. He was a "very active member of the West Ham School Board," a diligent magistrate, and an Essex County Councillor. His life affords a record of conscientious application to everything to which he set his hand. He died at his second home, Highcliffe, Lyme Regis, 19th of July, 1908, in his seventy-ninth year, and his funeral took place in the Friends' Burial Ground adjoining the Meeting House at Wanstead, near Leytonstone, the ground "on which he so often looked out as he sat in Meeting."

The Catalogue is entitled "*A Monograph of the Mycetoza, being a descriptive catalogue of the species in the herbarium of the British Museum*, by Arthur Lister, F.L.S." The first edition, 1894, is illustrated with seventy-eight plates and fifty-one woodcuts, and occupies 224 pages of letter-press. There is a brief prefatory note by William Carruthers, and a valuable introduction by the author. The reader need only scan here and there the elaborate and highly technical descriptions of individual species to obtain some idea of the enormous amount of labour expended in its preparation. It is well that some men and women have hobbies and the time and ability to devote to them successfully.

The Catalogue excited unusual interest for so technical a work, and Arthur Lister intended to bring out a second edition. It fell, however, to the lot of his accomplished daughter, Gulielma Lister, F.L.S., to complete his work, and the second edition appeared in 1911, much enlarged, and with 201 plates. Whilst none of the plates in the first edition are coloured, though exceedingly beautiful, a comparison with the uncoloured plates of the second edition shows a marked increase in beauty of production. The coloured plates of the second edition are beyond description; they must be examined if they are to be appreciated at their true worth. Attached to the species described are the names of the discoverers. In this connection the name Lister is of frequent occurrence.

By the kindness of Joseph Jackson Lister, Miss Lister and Miss Gulielma Lister, the obituary notice and both editions of the Catalogue have been added to the Reference Library, Devonshire House, and we commend them to the notice of visitors to the Library.

ISAAC SHARP.

<sup>2</sup> His educational work for the Society centred especially in service on the Committee of Croydon and Saffron Walden Schools, covering the years occupied by the responsible and anxious work connected with the removal of the school to its new home at Saffron Walden in 1879.