

Teasing Tansley? A 'tremendus' caricature from the launch party for the Flora of the British Isles

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Abstract

On the 24th March 1952 a celebratory luncheon was held to mark the publication of Clapham, Tutin and Warburg's *Flora of the British Isles*. The cover of the menu shows a caricature of what appears to be the plant ecologist Arthur Tansley drawn as a tree, and labelled 'supercilius tremendus'. Using this, and other lines of evidence (both written and interviews), we discuss how his colleagues viewed Tansley, and the role of humour in helping to cement groups of scientists.

Keywords: Arthur Tansley; history of ecology; humour; British flora

"It's a double-edged thing: on the one hand, groups are clearly formed around jokes - jokes are social, people feel an affinity with those with whom they share a sense of humour. But jokes are also collusive - they leave people out - either you get the joke or you don't. If you don't, then you're outside. In that sense, they are very tribal or territorial". Adam Phillips (2000, p.15)

Introduction

Arthur Tansley (1871-1955) 'the dominant force in early British plant ecology' (Cittadino, 1990 p.185), played a major part in developing both academic ecology and nature conservation in Britain during the first half of the 20th century. Among his many contributions he played an important role in the organisation of ecology – founding and editing academic journals, being the first president of the British Ecological Society (the first such academic society anywhere in the world), and making major contributions to the development of government conservation policy following the Second World War (Godwin, 1977; Cameron, 1999; Ayres, 2012). Indeed, the leading American plant ecologist Frederic Clements referred to him as 'the managing director, so to speak, of British ecology' (in a letter to Tansley dated 12 April 1915 – cited by Ayres, 2012 p.80). Knighted in the New Year's Honours list of 1950, he became the grand old man of British ecology. In this article we describe a caricature that likely referred at least in part to Tansley – from the menu card for the launch luncheon for the *Flora of the British Isles* (Clapham *et al.*, 1952). We use it to ask how his colleagues viewed the recently knighted Sir Arthur, and what it tells us about role of humour in helping to cement a group of mainly Cambridge-based botanists in the early to mid-twentieth century.

The flora and the celebratory luncheon

The *Flora of the British Isles* (Clapham *et al.*, 1952) – widely referred to as CTW for short - filled an important gap in British botany. Tansley, in his Foreword to CTW, remarked that “the lack of an adequate handbook has indeed been something of a national scandal” (1952, p.ix), and in a letter to his daughter Katherine dated 24th Feb 1952 he reports receiving two complimentary copies of the new Flora, writing ‘and, by God, it is badly wanted!’¹. Until its publication most British botanists were still relying on updated versions of nineteenth century floras for identifying plants. There had been several attempts to plug this gap, including one by The Clarendon Press (an imprint of Oxford University Press) with Tansley as the independent chair of the flora’s editorial board. This Clarendon Press flora, like other early 20th century attempts at a British flora, moved very slowly and never appeared (Allen, 2010). Eventually Tansley, in conjunction with Humphrey Gilbert-Carter (the director of Cambridge Botanic Gardens,) persuaded Tom Tutin, Roy Clapham and Edmund ‘Heff’ Warburg to collaborate on a smaller field flora that would be of use to botany students and others (Ayres, 2012). The three authors of the flora had all been students together at Cambridge where Tansley had lectured in the Botany School, and all had been taught by Gilbert-Carter to whom CTW was dedicated. In 1930, Roy Clapham joined Tansley at Oxford, where Tansley had, three years earlier, taken up the Sherardian Chair of Botany (although he continued to live in Grantchester, just outside Cambridge). At Oxford, Clapham’s studies of British plants “flourished under the encouragement of the ‘father of British plant ecology’” (Obituary, *The Times*, 14 January 1991): Clapham held a leadership role in the 1940 launch of the *Biological Flora of the British Isles* for which he produced in 1946 a new check-list of species. The list was a “useful preliminary” to the new *Flora* (Willis, 1994, p83). When CTW was published by Cambridge University Press in 1952, it became the standard field flora for Britain running to several editions – including smaller ‘excursion’ floras for ease of carrying in the field. It maintained this position until the start of the 1990s and the publication of Clive Stace’s ‘New Flora’ which is now in its 4th edition (Stace, 2019).

On 24th March 1952 there was a lunch to mark the publication of the first edition of CTW; as far as we are aware this has not been discussed previously in the literature on the history of British botany. We became aware of the luncheon as there is a surviving copy of the menu card (Figs. 1 & 2) in a copy of CTW that Roy Clapham gave to the Cambridge botanist Harry Godwin inscribed ‘with compliments and gratitude’ and dated Feb 23 1952 – the day before the celebratory lunch². There is nothing on the menu card to suggest that the publisher sponsored this event, and it’s possible that Tansley, who had private means, may have paid for it or even hosted it at his house just outside Cambridge where he and his wife often entertained. He had a reputation for enjoying fine food and wine (Ayres, 2012), and the wine served (Pouilly Fuissé 1949) was a decent Chardonnay. However, it’s the picture on the front of the menu card which we find of wider interest. While it is

¹ A photocopy of this letter is now in the personal collection of LJC: the originals are with Tansley’s family. In the letter he also comments that ‘The book is a bit heavy & thick – although on thin paper’. Similar comments about the size and thin paper – for what was intended as a book for use in the field – were frequently made over the next few years (Allen, 2010).

² The book and menu are now in the personal collection of DMW.

possible that the unattributed image was originally created earlier and for a different purpose, it struck us that it shows (Fig. 1) what is clearly a caricature of someone looking very much like Tansley, drawn as a tree – albeit a rather anthropomorphic tree that looks ever so pleased with itself. And the sign at the tree’s base (as if it was a specimen in a botanic garden) is labelled ‘SUPERCILIUS TREMENDUS’.

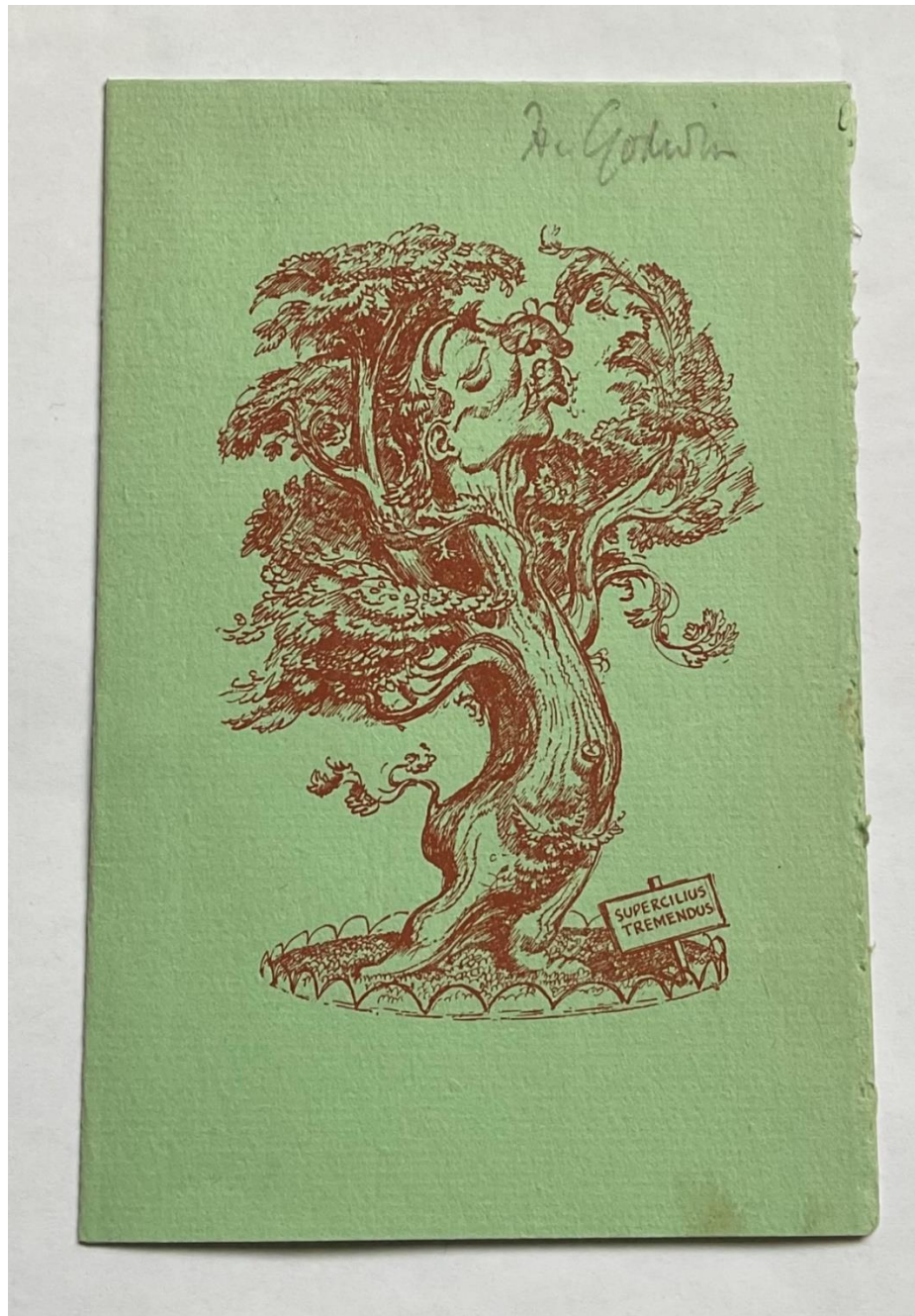


Figure 1. Front cover of the menu for the lunch to mark the publication of CTW. Note Harry Godwin’s name at the top. Size, 9.5 x 14.5 cm.

While Tansley was the likely target, we note, however, a complication in that the elderly Gilbert-Carter shared some of the facial features of Tansley at that time, and Gilbert-Carter also wore pince-nez – while Tansley wore conventional glasses.

The 'SUPERCILIUS TREMENDUS' tree also wears pince-nez. The specimen label for the tree also suggests the possibility that the caricature is of a Cambridge 'type specimen' of ageing botanist – Tansley, Gilbert-Carter (and others?) combined. However, the caricature most resembles Tansley – for example it has a moustache (correct for Tansley but not for Gilbert-Carter). In addition, the 'SUPERCILIUS' label doesn't fit with reminiscences of Gilbert-Carter by those who knew him (e.g. Gilmour & Walters, 1975).

There is no indication who drew the illustration, but it is interesting that Frank Kendon is one of the signatures that Godwin had collected on his copy of the Menu (Fig. 2). At the time Kendon was working for Cambridge University Press – the publisher of CTW. As well as being a poet and writer he was also an illustrator, so potentially he may have drawn the caricature or had connections to the artist who did. As Tansley was present at the lunch (his signature is on Godwin's copy of the menu, but there is no evidence Gilbert-Carter attended – Fig. 2), this seems to be good humoured teasing of the distinguished 'Sir Arthur' by his colleagues.

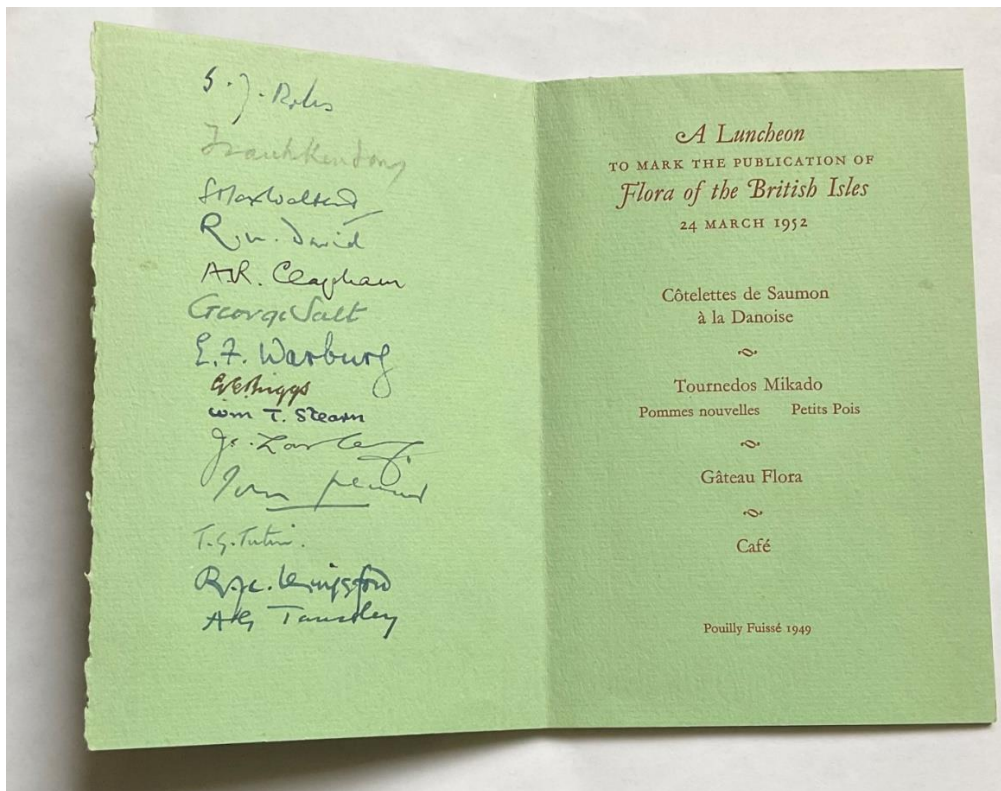


Figure 2. The interior of the menu card, with the signatures collected by Godwin (Tansley's is at the bottom of the list). We assume that Godwin likely got everyone present to sign his copy of the menu, but have no way of establishing this for certain as we are unaware of any other reference to this lunch.

Who instigated this caricature? Arthur Willis (1994) recounted Roy Clapham's "pleasing but slightly puckish sense of humour" (p.77) in his recall of an incident that occurred between Tansley, himself and a tree during a field class held near Oxford. Tansley firmly disagreed with Clapham's exclusion of "a sizeable ash tree" that stood at the corner of a quadrat's measured boundary and "called for this to be included,

as it ought to be in". Roy protested that it was outside the line but politely included it with a suppressed grin, apparent even to first-year students." (p.77). Clapham's 'puckish sense of humour' and close association with Tansley, is certainly interesting in the context of the currently unanswerable question: 'who arranged for the caricature on the cover of the menu?'

The wider background.

An important background to the culture of botanical humour is a longstanding tradition of British satirical humorous magazines, especially in schools and universities (DMW wrote for such a publication as a 6th form student at the start of the 1980s). A clearly relevant example is *The Tea Phytologist* – a humorous take on the plant science journal *The New Phytologist* (founded by Tansley), the 'Tea' version appeared irregularly from 1908 until 1984 and was produced by members of the Cambridge Botany School. This was 'full of humorous reference to local botanical personalities, comic citation and jibes at the students' own activities' (Godwin, 1985 p.3). Indeed, if the menu caricature was reused from another source the *Tea Phytologist* would be a likely candidate – however a search of past issues held at the University of Cambridge failed to find the image (David Briggs, pers comm). Tansley seems to have appreciated such good-natured humour. When the paleobotanist Marie Stopes published her own humorous botanical journal, *The Sportophyte* (founded on April Fool's Day, 1910) Tansley was curious if she had seen *The Tea Phytologist*. His remarks on her brand of humour are telling in terms of what he considered a "good" joke: "I congratulate you especially on the freedom from anything approaching malice in your hits – you have treated the N.P. [*The New Phytologist*] especially very well" (Cameron, 2021 p.93).

Tansley's own character may have made him an obvious target for such humour, and there are earlier somewhat similar looking caricatures of Tansley known. The most well-known shows Tansley and Fredrick Blackman, it comes from a humorous 'Cambridge illustrated lecture guide' – describing the two as teaching 'General Botany (Intermediate)' – pairing a tall thin Tansley with a short fat Blackman, both with bristling moustaches (Hutchinson, 1978)³. It was one of a series of caricatures of biologists by the marine biologist D.G. Lillie.

Tansley's character was complex. As the conservationist Max Nicholson reminisced at age 98 (in an unpublished interview by LJC in 2002) "I don't know that anybody really knew Tansley very well. He was an academic and person who lived very much in an intellectual world of his own. I don't think of him as very...although he was cultivated; he became a totem for society. But you had some difficulty in getting a hold of him – he wasn't a chap who was very social." Peter Grubb (Emeritus Professor of plant ecology at the University of Cambridge) who knew Harry Godwin and other ecologists and botanists of that generation suggests that "I think it's likely that the next generation did tease Tansley as he was a 'character'... I see a weakness that might be gently exploited in Tansley being great on the overview and generalizing ideas but not so smart at knowing the name of every plant' (email correspondence with DMW, February 2023). This is a very different type of botanist to Gilbert-Carter, the director of Cambridge Botanic Garden, who

³This is now in the collection of The National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG D11156). It can be viewed on the web, and was also illustrated on page 128 of Hutchinson (1978). It was donated to NPG in 1971 by 'G. Hutchinson' – suggesting that the ecologist G. Evelyn Hutchinson may have owned this caricature at some point.

intriguingly – in the context of the plant label caricature – wrote a short book on 'Descriptive labels for botanic gardens' (Gilbert-Carter, 1924). Tansley's taxonomic abilities fell well short of Gilbert-Carter's, indeed his inability to identify many plants in the field was one admitted by Tansley himself, and Roy Clapham was one of the botanists who helped Tansley with this aspect of field work (Ayres, 2012; Godwin, 1977; Willis, 1994). In his monumental *The British Isles and their vegetation* (Tansley, 1939 p.xiii) he thanks Clapham for his help, writing 'I own a deep debt of gratitude for constant help in the field and for lists of species collected and noted'. Both men shared a love of language and clear communication, and Clapham also assisted Tansley by suggesting to him the term "ecosystem" that Tansley first brought into print in 1935 (without acknowledging Clapham) (Willis, 1994, p.81).

There is another less affectionate potential caricature of Tansley as a younger man, which matches the supercilious characterization of the caricature tree. Several commentators have suggested that the character Charles Tansley in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf, 1927) was based on Arthur Tansley (Cameron, 1999, p.11), who was on the margins of her Bloomsbury milieu and whose Freudian science she disliked in part because she recognized Freud as infringing on her literary terrain of the everyday life (Forrester & Cameron, 2017, p.516). By the 1920s, Tansley, in Freud's view a 'nice type of the English scientist' (Cameron & Forrester, 1999), had ventured well beyond his botanical field to become one of the chief popularisers of Freudian psychology in Britain with his surprise bestseller *The New Psychology and Its Relations to Life* (1920). LJC has previously noted that after letters by Tansley and Woolf appeared next to one another in *The Nation and The Athenaeum* in September 1925, Woolf changed the name of her character "Tansy" to "Tansley" (Cameron, 2001, p.146). In the novel Tansley is an academic who is considered "brilliant but I think fundamentally unsound" (Woolf, 1927, p.7) and described as "such a miserable specimen... a sarcastic brute" (p.6) who was 'forever walking up and down, up and down...saying who had won this, who had won that" (p.7). His character merges with the tree image that the artist Lily Briscoe is attempting to place in the right spot on her canvas: "I must move the tree to the middle; that matters – nothing else. Could she not hold fast to that, she asked herself...and not argue; and if she wanted a little revenge take it by laughing at him?" (p.80). If this association of Charles Tansley with Arthur Tansley is correct then it's clear that he, or more generally the Oxbridge-type he represented⁴ could be satirized in a more cutting manner than the gentler poking fun at his apparent pomposity seen in the CTW luncheon caricature. But both Woolf's withering portrait, and the much later CTW caricature, suggest that his contemporaries thought that status was important to Tansley, and that this could provide a target for either harsh criticism or gentle teasing, depending on the context.

The CTW lunch menu card adds illustrative detail to the history of the publication of the CTW Flora. More importantly it helps highlight the role of humour in bonding groups – this can be just as true in botany as other areas of life – albeit with the

⁴ In relation to Charles Tansley's whisper in Lily Briscoe's ear "Women can't paint, women can't write..." (p80), Woolf's portrait of a supercilious academic in *To the Lighthouse* has in some respects more resonant sting on an institutional rather than an individual level, especially given Arthur Tansley's comparatively supportive and active engagement with a network of women academics (such as Agnes Arber and Marie Stopes), educators and family members throughout his life. Woolf's novel would be followed by her famous feminist pamphlet *A Room of One's Own* delivered first in 1928 at Cambridge where women would be waiting another twenty years to be granted degrees.

danger of crossing a boundary into something more exclusionary. Humour can create groups both by group bonding and/or excluding 'others'. While we imagine that Tansley and his colleagues 'got the joke', no doubt Tansley, given his interest in psychoanalysis, would also have had something to say himself about joking processes and techniques. Tansley's final book *Mind and Life*, published in 1952 – the same year as CTW – was a synthesis of his life's psychological and ecological preoccupations. While not addressing humour specifically, here he explained the unconscious origin of the "habits and eccentricities of everyday life" (p.101) and underscored the "herd instinct amongst man's basic instincts" (p.127) that causes the individual to form beliefs and adopt codes of conduct shared by members of his "tribal herd". Humour is not the only mechanism for group bonding, for example in the 1970s summer hiking trips formed an important aspect of the bonding of an influential group of ecologists centred on Imperial College's Silwood Park campus (Gray, 2013). Certainly, our own quest to establish the background to the humour in the menu has reconnected us with a wider botanical group; LJC with people she knew as a PhD student and Junior Research Fellow in Cambridge over 20 years ago, while it caused DMW to renew contact with Peter Grubb, who he had not seen since 'the world turned upside down' in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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