

This special issue of the *Natural History Bulletin of the Siam Society* commemorates a rather special person: James F. Maxwell, or Max, who passed away in May of 2015. He was a botanist renowned for his prodigious collections and fieldwork. It is fitting that he passed away in the forest, while on an expedition in Rayong Province. He probably would have wanted it that way, if he had had a choice. Max first came to Thailand while serving his tour of duty in the U. S. Army during the Vietnam War, and he soon developed a fascination and love for the plants of Thailand. After his tour of duty, he decided to return to Thailand rather than work or study in the U.S. To support his main vocation of collecting, identifying and describing plants, he took on several jobs including newspaper writer, English teacher, FAO employee, post-graduate student and herbarium curator at several institutions, spending his last few decades at Prince of Songkla University and Chiang Mai University, where he initiated and maintained herbaria in their biology departments. He regularly joined research projects where his talents were needed.

We will not dwell further on details of his career and interactions with others, as Dr. Stephen Elliott has written an absorbing and informative obituary for this issue and several other obituaries have been published in other journals (including *Biotropica*, and the *Cambodian Journal of Natural History*). Instead, we will comment on what his work meant to Thailand and to natural history in general. In life, he was not a distinguished or renowned scientist. He did not have a Ph.D., and did not hold any important post or position at a university or international organization. He was not good at managing finances or in obtaining grants. He never owned a car, computer or a cellphone and he typed his herbarium labels and reports on an old-fashioned mechanical typewriter. He had a disdain for modern technology and preferred to be old-fashioned. He lived very modestly and shunned the badges and pretensions of class status. These eccentricities earned him some renown. He was not well-liked by everyone, but his good points—his dedication to hard work, attention to detail, respect for the environment, sense of humor and general honesty—endeared him to his many friends.

But how does such a seemingly flawed person deserve such respect and a special issue dedicated to him? Max's obsessive dedication to collecting and identifying plants, and managing his herbaria, made him useful beyond anyone's expectations or call to duty. His work earned him a world-wide reputation among botanists as being among the world's last old-style naturalists and documenters of the diversity of life on Earth. In the modern age of deep concern over the global decline in biodiversity, scientists with such talents are rare. Hence, his talent and mastery of the flora of the region stood out even more.

Max was admirably meticulous about preparing pressed specimens. His specimens are well known for their careful documentation on the labels: location, description of vegetative and floral characters, habitat and even geological characterization of the collecting site. He would also collect enough duplicates to distribute to local and several major international herbaria (especially, in Leiden, Harvard and Singapore). He did not keep an accurate record of how many specimens he collected in his lifetime, but botanists estimate it at close to 100,000. These specimens are available to all botanists and are an impressive contribution to our knowledge of the flora of the region. No one living or dead has collected more, at least in Thailand. Most ecologists are careless about documenting the species that they study and do not prepare voucher specimens to international standards, if they prepare them at all. Everyone who worked with Max had their species carefully vouchered in local and international herbaria, and learned how to do it themselves to his high standard.

Maxwell also promoted a unique and important kind of botanical survey—the creation of a “florula”, which is a near-complete inventory of all the vascular plants within a particular ecological area such as a mountain, swamp, or a protected conservation area, adapting to the needs of his collaborators or sponsors as required. A glance through his bibliography (given at the end of this issue) shows where he spent most of his collecting days: Doi Suteh-Pui mountain massif near Chiang Mai, Ko Hong hill (a forested hill near the Prince of Songkla University campus, Hat Yai), Khao Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary in the Southeast, Sam Lan (Phraputthachai) Park in Saraburi, Ko Si Chang (island), Jae Sorn National Park, Doi Khun National Park, the Sipandon wetlands in the Mekong River, The Thai-Myanmar border along the Yetagum–Yadana gas pipeline, Khao Yai National Park, especially the Mo Singto CTFS plot, etc. The list is long. Incidentally, if readers have trouble finding Max’s place names on maps and other publications, it is because of his personalized and idiosyncratic spelling of names—he refused to accept the official Thai system of transliteration into English, established by the Royal Institute. Stubborn Max preferred his own “more phonetic” system of spelling; hence few of his names match those on official Thai Survey Department maps.

Maxwell’s main formal systematic interest was the family Melastomataceae, about which he wrote several publications while he studied in Singapore. However, he seemed to be most passionate about documenting florulas, and also in publishing books on weeds, an effort supported by a colleague in the Faculty of Agriculture at Chiang Mai University. His well-illustrated books on weeds were a delight to ecologists. Without weeds, natural ecosystems would never recover from our constant destruction of the natural landscape and its vegetation. To many ecologists, weeds have become the most important plants on earth—remember that when—in vain—you try to eradicate them from your garden.

We could go on and on about Maxwell, but this brief introduction to this issue, which features original research by some of his friends and colleagues, serves to underscore the value of his contributions. Maxwell authored or coauthored at least 28 publications in our *Natural History Bulletin*, although he was not a member of the Siam Society. For those who do not remember him personally, we have assembled some photos to help bring him to life.

Maxwell had a deep respect for the famous botanical collectors who came before him, and saw himself sitting at their feet, basking in their aura: Linnaeus, Hooker, Bentham and van Steenis, among the old greats, and the more recent collectors of the Asian or Thai flora, including, among others, A. F. G. Kerr, C. C. Hosseus, H. G. B. Garrett, G. Seidenfaden, K. Larsen, B. Stone, C. Pengklai and J. Veldkamp. One part of a wall in his CMUB Herbarium in the Biology Department (the “Wall of Fame”) is adorned with framed pictures of these great botanists, which he showed to appreciative visitors. He spoke of them in serious reverential tones, as though we were at the herbarium altar. He also hid a portrait of himself, on the back of another picture on the wall, to be turned over, he instructed, only after he passed away. So now Max’s image (seated next to a portrait of van Steenis in the Rijksherbarium, in Leiden) hangs among the other revered botanists on the Wall of Fame.

It is with deep regret that we also note the passing of Dr. Benito C. Tan in January of this year, a contributor to this issue and also a friend of J. F. Maxwell. Dr. Tan supported our efforts to commemorate the passing of Maxwell with this issue, and helped in its preparation.

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James F. Maxwell (left) and Ben Stone (1933-1994) at the Rijksherbarium, Leiden, paying respect to Van Steenis (portrait) (29 August 1989).



James F. Maxwell (right) and Warren Brockelman (left) are drinking Max's famous Mekong and Coke at his home in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2005.



James F. Maxwell on a field survey in Rayong Province, Southeast Thailand (2015).



James F. Maxwell collecting a *Macaranga* specimen in Rayong Province, Southeast Thailand (2015).



James F. Maxwell on his last field survey, Rayong Province, Southeast Thailand (2015).