

Dr. John Stanley Beard – The Very Same

“...I am an explorer, you know. I want to know what’s there over the next hill...”



Our excitement and eager curiosity were temporarily replaced by anxious uncertainty as we walked around trying to discover which of the houses belonged to Dr. Beard. Mike had been there before and was struggling with his memory. We both stopped and focused on a house we thought the most likely. A flight of stairs led steeply down from the pavement to a dim porch. A discerning eye had chosen a beautiful and interesting collection of plants that flanked both sides of the stairs and was eventually scattered arbitrarily along the porch. You could imagine this house being cool and enjoyable even in the middle of a hot Australian summer when temperatures can get up to 40°C. We were on Fraser Street in Applecross, which is a leafy suburb of Perth. The house we stood in front of was one of the comfortable residences overlooking the Swan River estuary that runs through the city of Perth in Western Australia. We hurried down the steps to the dim porch, rang the bell and waited, our brains conjuring up and replacing images of what J. S. Beard could turn out to be.

Mike had actually met Beard before. As an undergraduate Mike was familiar with vegetation maps for Western Australia that were produced by a J. S. Beard. While working as a geologist after graduation, he found that they did not have the vegetation map for the area being worked on. After unsuccessful attempts at obtaining the map he was given a contact and told to “buy it from the guy who had done the maps”. And so he called, got an address, went and bought the map from Beard and that was that. He had no way of knowing then that his career would bring him to Trinidad, the very country where Beard had begun his career fifty-three years earlier. Yet this is exactly what happened.

In 1996, Mike was appointed as the Plant Ecologist at the University of the West Indies here in Trinidad. He knew very little about Trinidad, only that it was in the West Indies and that West Indies meant cricket. It

was not long though, before he came in contact with “The Natural Vegetation of Trinidad” by J. S. Beard. The same J. S. Beard? He realised that it was the very same man. When this eventually came up in conversations the inevitable response from all of us in excited disbelief was “The J. S. Beard? Is he still alive?” for we obviously had no idea how young he was when he had come to Trinidad and accomplished all that he had. It is not surprising that when in August 2000, the opportunity arose for us to visit Western Australia, one of the things Mike and I were most looking forward to, was a meeting with Beard. Once we contacted him, and plans were made, it became clear that many others wanted to in some way share in this experience and what was supposed to be a mere meeting escalated to an interview.

I recognised the gentleman who opened the door as Dr. Beard himself since I had seen a picture in one of his books – a distinguished gentleman with a crop of silvery hair, a kind but humorous smile and bushy eyebrows. His welcome was warm and sincere and I got the distinct impression that he was as excited and enthusiastic as we were about this meeting. We were led through the door into a living area that extended to the veranda through large French windows, blurring the boundary between indoors and outdoors. The effect is an immediate and striking view of the river as you step into the house. I had noticed a lovely array of orchids on the porch and the suspicion that these plants were favoured was confirmed by the specimens in the living area – well tended with long beautiful sprigs of flowers. We were introduced to his wife Pamela and his daughter Rowena who was actually born in Trinidad in 1943.

Pamela is a dynamic woman who has some interesting stories of her own to tell. She has an amazing memory for the people who touched their lives, their names and what they did and this greatly added to our information on social aspects of the Beards’ lives in

Trinidad. We were in the midst of people who were very open and willing to share information of their lives and events in Trinidad so we decided to let the conversation take its own course with only minor inputs to direct it.

We spoke for over four hours in which Beard proceeded to charm and fascinate us with his engaging personality and witty anecdotes. Old photo albums were pulled out as he covered the places he had been to and work he had done. He was eager to show his old calypso records. Indeed, it was a pleasure to hear him switch to his 'pseudo-trini dialect' as he gave his rendition of 'The Graf Zeppelin' by Attila the Hun, remembering all the words of a whole verse without falter. Dr. Beard is a product of that era that scientists today wistfully read and dream about. He has travelled far and wide, lived in very different countries and studied subjects "inside-out" in those countries. He has sampled many different cultures – when you hear him tell his stories – and a great raconteur he is – you hear the fondness, acceptance of what he has experienced and understood of those people and their land. He has the confidence of someone who knows he has seen and done more than most and by that token, has a contribution to make.

Imagine 1937, you're a young British Forest Officer, just twenty-one years old. Your 'first tour of duty' is to be in Trinidad. Ten years later, apart from numerous papers written and a Land-Use map compiled, you have produced vegetation studies for Trinidad, Tobago and the Windward and Leeward Islands – work which will continue to be important over sixty years later. The next fourteen years are spent in South Africa and then finally to Australia in 1961, all the time continuing groundbreaking works. Fourteen books, eight contributed chapters to books, twenty-nine vegetation maps and explanatory booklets and many scientific papers later, you see in the new century.

Beard spent just ten years in our region at the very beginning of his professional career and he went on to accomplish much grander projects. It is amazing though, and he would not have imagined then and cannot believe it even now, how significant his work was and continues to be to this region.

John Stanley Beard was born on February 15, 1916 at Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire in England. At

the age of fifteen he attended Marlborough College for three years, all this time not giving much thought to what career he would pursue. Fate and how our paths are chosen is a tantalising and elusive subject that many like dwelling on. However, this thought does come to mind when Beard explains that he himself does not know how he came to study Forestry. It was not something he had always wanted to do. His father being an architect, it was hoped that young John would follow along similar lines. For this reason, once he finished Marlborough College he went to University College, London, and studied for a term at the School of Architecture. It did not take him long to realise that he would not be able to "stand" that life. He was also beginning to realise that, for him, England meant a ghastly climate and it was "disgracefully overcrowded". This short dabble in architecture and his newly acknowledged feelings for England made him look elsewhere for his future.

"...wide open spaces are what I'm really after. So...what about taking up forestry?" In 1934, against the advice of the Professor at the Imperial Forestry Institute, Beard entered Pembroke College, Oxford to study Forestry. He was advised that jobs were difficult to come by, so he decided that he could solve this problem by graduating at the head of the class. This he duly accomplished and it did secure him a post in the British Colonial Forest Service where he would be employed from 1937 to 1947. That first ten years of his career was dedicated to work in the Caribbean and the Tropical America region. Back then it was a practice that, on joining the Forest Service, young forestry officers would be sent on a 'first tour of duty' to one of the colonies. This initial period spent at the colonies varied in length depending on where the officer was placed, "it was very short in West Africa, but it was quite long in some other parts that were more healthy". On return from the colonies they would study for a year at the Forestry School at Oxford. For Beard, his first tour of duty 1937-1939 was to be Trinidad. The journey took a couple of weeks by sea on a Dutch boat. He was to assume the post of Divisional Officer as a replacement for John Cater, so he was sent directly to San Fernando headquarters. Beard had no idea what to expect from Trinidad but was pleasantly surprised. Compared to other parts of the Empire in those days, Trinidad was "civilised and

comfortable". In fact when he got back to Oxford after his year of service, the other officers' response to his experiences was "What, you lived in a town?"

Classification of vegetation in the tropics was in its infancy. Accepted systems of nomenclature and classification were mainly based on temperate vegetation communities and proved unsuitable for the tropics. Workers in this field had to build their own systems to suit their local conditions. There was a movement at the time to encourage Colonial Forest Officers, led by P. W. Richards (author of *The Tropical Rainforest* 1952, 1996), to make studies of the local vegetation in their respective colonies. Richard's work had delved deeper into techniques that used physiognomic descriptions like the structure of the vegetation in the communities, and profile diagrams to classify tropical woody vegetation types. It was felt that using purely floristics, that is, the species present, to classify the plant communities in the tropics could not work. Beard became one of these young officers who took up this challenge.

The return to the Imperial Forestry Institute at Oxford for a year was customary before the war. This period lasted a year in which there were no set courses but they were allowed to read and develop their scientific interests. While Beard was spending his time at Oxford in 1940, Dr Burt-Davy talked him into doing one of these vegetation studies and it was suggested that Beard should gather data to prepare a doctoral thesis. His involvement in the physiognomic approach to vegetation was entirely due to this background.

In 1940 the Colonial Forest Service employed Beard, and although the Second World War was on, he

was still sent, new wife in tow, to Trinidad. He was made the Forest Department's Research Officer and his priority was to compile Land- Use maps using 'new-fangled' aerial photography supplied to them by the oil company at Pointe-a-Pierre. This map only showed lands alienated for agriculture so he suggested that they ought to make a vegetation map to show the original, pre-Columbian plant communities on the unalienated crown land. The Department had been taking stock of the timber in those years as a Survey of Resources and this data was utilised as the basis for his doctoral ambitions to which he dedicated two days per week. He filled in areas not covered in the survey like Nariva Swamp and the Northern Range and he

went over to Tobago, which no one had looked at before. He was surprised at its difference from Trinidad and as he found later, from the Windward Islands. The physiognomic approach to vegetation studies was



11 July 1940



Middle life. c. 1958



The ancient sage and the dynamic woman
11 July 2000

also used in much of his later research including his paper "Climax Vegetation In Tropical America" (*Ecology* 25: 127-58, 1944) which was well received in the USA. According to Beard, "It is ideal for large-scale studies of the vegetation of a large area, especially if the area is previously poorly known. Later, more detailed work can fill in data on floristic communities".

When Beard returned to Trinidad in 1940 with his wife Pamela he was based at the Forest Department at Port of Spain headquarters and they lived on Mt. Hololo Road in Cascade. They spent eighteen months there before they were suspected of being spies and

Beard was transferred to San Fernando. John and Pamela tried to convince us that this was untrue with some suspect explanation about a generator and its noise?! This move however, was more than a bit disappointing, especially for Pamela since it meant her having to leave her job. Apart from this they both liked living at Cascade. Beard was applying his bit of experience from one term of studying architecture and whatever was in his genes while they built a house on their own up at Mount Hololo.

Pamela had lots of activities to occupy her while living in Cascade. Her knowledge of French and particularly German got her an intriguing job in the Censorship Office, which was opened in 1940 and was part of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. Since World War II was on, it was not censorship but more like "Intelligence", according to Beard. All mail that passed between Europe and South America came through Trinidad. Imagine being paid to read other peoples' mail – but mail that was scary and exciting. Mail that made it obvious that Japan was going to declare war on the USA – and they did, and despite all, surprised the USA when they attacked Pearl Harbour.

A cook and a yard-boy to look after domestics, left Dr. Beard and Pamela's evenings relatively open for socialising. One of their favourite past-times was dancing at the 'Country Club' in Maraval. Dances were held three times for the week and the Beards enjoyed this tremendously, especially when their favourite band, Roy Rollock was playing. Visiting friends and drinking rum was also something to look forward to after working all day. According to Pamela, "I could go out and drink rum, which I liked very much... not with Coca-Cola which I thought ruined it, but with ginger-ale". One could get 'good' rum like Fernandes for 3s 6d per bottle (less than a Trinidad and Tobago dollar in the 1940's) or alternatively, you could take your chances with cheap rum. "Cheap rum" was colourless rum, put into ordinary beer bottles and just labelled 'strong rum'.

Rowena, their first child, was born in 1943 at the oil company's Staff Hospital in Pointe-à-Pierre. Just four months after, Beard was seconded as adviser on forestry in the Windward and Leeward Islands. Apart from maybe passing some laws to protect the forests, in many of these islands there were no actual policies

to control exploitation or regeneration. This job took Beard up and down the Windward and Leeward Islands. "It was terrific. I loved it". The three of them ventured as far as Grenada. "All of us were in the first commercial flight of our British West Indian Airways from Trinidad to Grenada in about October 1943." Pamela was forced to be a bit more sedentary; her ability to work with her husband on these trips coming to a temporary halt since Rowena was still so young.

The war had been over for about two years, Rowena was now three years old, and with thoughts on the family, education for children became an issue. They felt that if they stayed in Colonial territories it would mean being separated from their children, since they would have to send them to England. Beard looked for a job where this problem could be overcome. He applied for one he had seen, got it, and soon they were on their way to South Africa where they would spend the next fourteen years of their lives. Natal Tanning Extract Co. Ltd. employed him as an Estates Research Officer from 1947 to 1961 to largely work on crop improvement in the wattle industry. The Beards liked their life in South Africa; they thought it was very pleasant. Dr. Beard himself although enjoying the life there, after fourteen years, was beginning to get bored with the work.

"Now that's one country I would never want to go to," was Beard's first assessment of Australia after attending a conference there. After living in South Africa, Australia was a stark contrast. Back then, things were still very rural, with Sydney having just two modern, high-rise buildings. The biggest problem though was that Beard had felt that "they (Australians) were still in a state of resenting the immigrants". However, in his quest for wide open spaces it is not surprising that, contrary to his first impression of Australia, this is the part of earth he would choose to settle in. It took Pamela and the children – now three girls, a few years to adjust. Pamela had tried to discourage the move to Australia; "I hated it at first. Hated it! My life in South Africa was so happy." In 1961, on applying for the post, he was appointed Director of King's Park, Perth. One of his major tasks was "to plan and establish a botanic garden and display Western Australian native plants." This meant the collection of propagating material and

studying the ecology of the native species in their habitats to investigate their ecological requirements. Beard's research and career were more or less concentrated in Western Australia except for a two-year break from 1970 to 1972 when he took the post as Director at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney. After retirement he finished the vegetation survey and still writes scientific papers on various subjects.

During the course of this work and his personal research, an extensive amount of fieldwork was undertaken and this afforded Beard the opportunity to study the vegetation of Western Australia in some detail. In the course of botanical surveys over a period of twenty years, he covered all accessible parts of the state, travelling over 200,000 kilometres and mapped the whole area, two million square kilometres. His research in Trinidad possibly was the foundation of his studies in Western Australia – "it was a natural progress to approach the Australian vegetation using an adapted physiognomic classification." This research produced a series of vegetation maps, explanatory booklets and scientific papers culminating in 'Plant Life of Western Australia' – a beautiful book published in 1990, which includes over 550 coloured plates and brings the Western Australian landscapes to life.

They have now been in Australia for forty years. Sitting in their lovely home, listening to John and Pamela Beard eagerly tell their stories, with Rowena helping us to keep things on track and clarify details was a pleasure. A few hours in one day would never be enough to know very much of anyone's life. But looking at Beard interacting with his wife and daughter, one could not help thinking that in his enviable career he must have achieved some balance. One of the determining steps in achieving this balance in life is choosing the right spouse. We feel Pamela and John made truly appropriate and successful choices. Beard, in correspondence and during the interview, mentioned more than a couple of times that they were celebrating their sixtieth anniversary that year. You could hear the pride in his voice. Another striking insight into their regard for each other was his reply when we asked *him* for an interview about his work in Trinidad. His reply was "My wife and I will be happy to meet you and share our experiences in Trinidad." They do see themselves as partners in every way.

They have seen many places together, worked hard, played hard, borne and brought up three girls and are now retired comfortably.

This article, we hope, gives a brief overview of the life, past and present, of a man who has made great contributions to vegetation studies in Trinidad and around the world. It also shows how a new concept, like the physiognomic approach, to which a few might be loyal, was born and evolved to an accepted scientific approach. An approach which Beard still applauds. Once, when he was asked to referee a paper, the author of the paper had suggested that much more could be got out of the paper if descriptions of physiognomy were included. And Beard's response to the editor was: "A blinding glimpse of the obvious!"

(This article is largely based on an interview of John and Pamela Beard. The authors carried out the interview on 6 September 2000 at the interviewees' home in Perth, Western Australia)

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The authors would like to congratulate The Forestry Division in Trinidad, in this year 2001, on the celebration of their 100th anniversary.

The following are some publications by **J.S. Beard** that are relevant to our region:

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