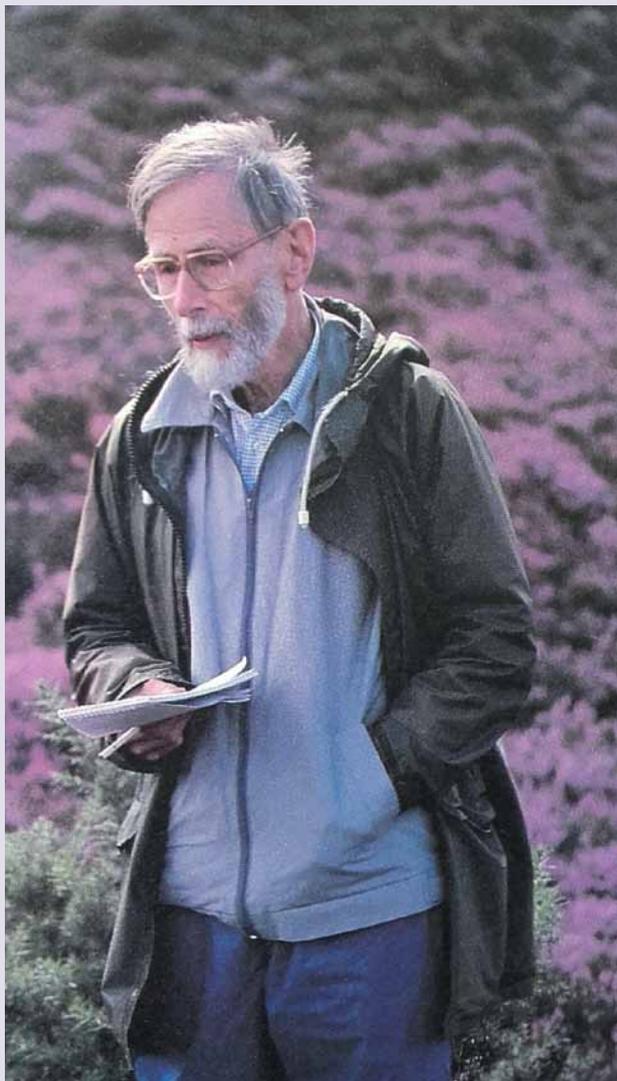


OBITUARIES

CHARLES HENRY GIMINGHAM (1923–2018)

On his 90th birthday, in 2013, the Heather Trust toasted Charles Gimingham as ‘the founder of much of our knowledge of heathland ecology, and the man who inspired generations of ecologists’. That seems to be a fair summary of the career of one of Britain’s best-known plant ecologists, one remembered with affection, as well as awe, by his many students and colleagues. I first met Charles in 1977 after arriving in Aberdeen as the new young Assistant Regional Officer in the Nature Conservancy Council. I was responsible for nature reserves in North-east Scotland and Charles had suggested setting up some monitoring plots in one or two of them. Knowing his reputation as an authority on heaths and heather moors, the author of the standard text on the subject, and, as Magnus Magnusson later expressed it, as something of ‘a living legend’, I felt slightly nervous. I needn’t have done. Charles Gimingham was always approachable, generous with his time, and helpful and engaged in his advice. Then in his mid-50s, he was a neat, slender, and dignified figure with spectacles, short brown hair and a matching beard, and a thoughtful, precise, slightly hesitant way of speaking. He was modest, rather shy, and, for an ecologist, surprisingly practical-minded. You sensed that he was, in every way, a *good* man. His students loved him. At one point they wore T-shirts with the slogan ‘Prof Gim Rules OK’. It was funny because Charles had such a quiet, modest presence.

When Charles was himself a student, at Cambridge during the Second World War, plant ecology was still in its infancy. His chief mentor was his father, Conrad Theodore Gimingham, who was an entomologist and director of plant pathology at the Ministry of Agriculture’s lab in Harpenden. Charles was born on 28th April 1923 and educated at Gresham’s School in Norfolk where he won an open scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Choosing botany as his final year subject in the Natural Science course, he graduated with a first in 1944. After a year as a research assistant at London’s Imperial College, Charles joined the staff of Aberdeen University, at first as a research assistant but very soon, after the completion of his



Charles Gimingham in 1993. *Des Thompson*

PhD, as a lecturer in the Department of Botany. He remained there for the rest of his life. In 1948 he married Elizabeth Caroline Baird, daughter of the Minister of St Machar’s Cathedral in Aberdeen, with whom he had three daughters, Alison, Anne and Clare.

At first Charles taught all kinds of botanical subjects, including agricultural botany, as well as his father's discipline, plant pathology. He led field courses to various places in eastern Scotland until the department acquired its own field studies centre in Sutherland. He also helped to set up a Masters course in ecology at the university. His research interests were at first very broad and included saltmarshes, sand dunes and bryophytes. Gradually they began to focus on that quintessential landscape of north-east Scotland, heather moorland. By the 1960s, heather moors were in decline, partly through neglect, partly through inappropriate management, which robbed the soil of its fertility and promoted coarse grass at the expense of heather.

Charles Gimingham's studies of the biology and ecology of heather, and its regenerative capacity, contributed to better moorland practice in the form of longer burning cycles which also tended to maximise biodiversity. His work lies at the heart of *The Muirburn Code* (2017), a Scottish government document which sets out the law and best practice for land managers. His book, *Ecology of Heathlands* (1972), became the standard university text, and was followed in 1975 by *Introduction to Heathland Ecology* and, in 1992, by *The Lowland Heathland Management Handbook*. Another key work was his monograph on *Calluna vulgaris* (Heather), published in 1960 in the *Journal of Ecology's* Biological Flora series.

Charles took a six-month leave of absence to visit heathland sites in Scandinavia and northern Europe, and help to establish a European Heathland Workshop on management and conservation, which still meets. He also visited Libya, where he studied the ecology of a desert oasis, and met the then King, and Japan, which led to a lifelong interest in Japan's culture and traditions. At home he became Vice-county Recorder for both South and North Aberdeenshire in 1961, serving until 1979 and 1977 respectively. He also

became much involved in conservation management, sitting formally on various local and Scottish boards and committees. His advice was much sought after by such bodies as the Countryside Commission for Scotland, and its successor, Scottish Natural Heritage, and the National Trust for Scotland. He helped to establish the Cairngorms as Scotland's second National Park in 2003, and he edited *The Ecology, Land Use and Conservation of the Cairngorms* (2002).

Charles Gimingham was promoted Senior Lecturer at the university in 1961 and Reader three years later. He was given the honour of a personal chair in 1969. In 1981, he was appointed head of department and Regius Professor (a title dating back to the 15th century). He formally retired in 1988, aged 65, but remained busy in various advisory roles on heritage and conservation bodies. During his long career he served as President of the British Ecological Society and the Botanical Society of Edinburgh. He was made an OBE in 1990, held a higher (ScD) degree at Cambridge, and was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was also a long-serving elder at St Machar's Cathedral.

Charles was famously willing to 'get his hands dirty' on fieldwork, sprawling full length in various wet or peaty habitats, lens in hand, and mucking in with the cooking and washing up at the field centre afterwards. One of the outstanding postwar generation of British botanists and ecologists, his influence on the management and preservation of moorland and upland landscapes was great. His name will long be associated with heather and its management.

Charles Gimingham died at Milltimber, near Aberdeen, on 19th June 2018, aged 95. He is survived by his wife and daughters, and by his beloved grandson Jack.

Peter Marren