

William Dickson Lang – a pioneer of British mosquito study

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William Dickson Lang was born in Kurnal in the Punjab on 29 December 1878, the second son of Edward, a civil engineer, and Hebe Lang. He came to England at the age of one when the family returned from India. He was educated at Christ's Hospital School in Hertford and later, in 1894, was admitted to Harrow School. In 1898 he entered Pembroke College, Cambridge as an exhibitioner and later became a scholar. He had a long-standing passion for natural history, collecting butterflies and showing a particular interest in birds and grasses. So it was no surprise that he chose to read a Natural Sciences Tripos with zoology as his major subject and botany, geology and mineralogy as subsidiaries. He was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts (First Class in Part I) in 1901 and continued to study Part II gaining 2nd Class in 1902. He received the degree of Master of Arts in 1905.

In 1902 he entered the Geology Department of the British Museum (Natural History) as an Assistant and was placed in charge of Protozoa, Coelenterates, Sponges and Polyzoa. Lang had become especially interested in geology and palaeontology in part as a result of his study of the Lower Lias cliffs of the Dorset coast. This stemmed from a visit to Charmouth in 1898 when he also met Georgiana Catherine Dixon, whom he subsequently married in 1908.

Being unfit for military service during the 1914-1918 World War he was seconded to the Department of Entomology and took responsibility for curating mosquitoes. As a result of this new area of activity and interest he compiled the distribution records of the anopheline mosquitoes of England and Wales, which resulted in a major publication in 1918, and, in 1920, he produced a handbook of British mosquitoes. This monograph was the first ever published on the mosquitoes of this country. During this time, in 1919, he gained a ScD. from the University of Cambridge.

He returned to the Department of Geology after the War and rose to become Assistant Keeper in 1921, Deputy Keeper in 1927 and Keeper of Geology in 1928, the year in which he was awarded the Lyell Medal of the Geological Society. In the following year he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.

He retired from the Museum in 1938 on his 60th birthday, admitting to be pleased to be free of administrative duties. He settled in Charmouth and devoted much of his time to the study of natural history and was closely associated with the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society and the Dorset County Museum. His house became a "local institute", a place to which many visitors to Charmouth brought their questions and discoveries for he was admired as an authority on both natural history and palaeontology.

He wrote numerous articles in his retirement including annual reports for the Society but never returned to the subject of mosquitoes. He also developed a special interest in the remarkable fossil collector Mary Anning, and wrote several articles on her life and works. It is said that he personified the Victorian qualities of authority and respectability and was a person of high principle. He was a cultured man, was well read with a sound knowledge of the Classics and was appreciative of classical music. He was a strongly religious man who took an active part in the affairs of his local churches both in London and Charmouth and wrote a history of Charmouth Church.

His major contribution to the advancement of the study of British mosquitoes was, of course, the Handbook. Not only was it a major work in its own right, being the first such publication to detail the biology and ecology of the species known at that time and allow their easy identification, but it gave John Marshall the essential information and background to commence his control and biological studies in Hayling Island.

William Dickson Lang died on 3 March 1966, aged 87 and was survived by his wife, who died in the following year and their children Geoffrey and Brenda.

Publications on British Mosquitoes

1918. *A map of England and Wales showing the localities whence Anopheles - the malaria bearing mosquito has been obtained.* 63pp + map. London. British Museum (Natural History).
1920. *A handbook of British mosquitoes.* 125pp + 4 plates. London. British Museum (Natural History).