

Preface

For fifty years I have worked in the herbarium at Cambridge University on the British, Irish and European floras. I have collected some 25,000 specimens from most parts of Great Britain and Ireland and made many visits to Continental Europe. Particular attention has been given to most critical genera: *Cerastium*, *Crepis*, *Dactylorhiza*, *Euphrasia*, *Fumaria*, *Hieracium*, *Limonium*, *Pilosella*, *Prunus*, *Rhinanthus*, *Salicornia*, *Salix*, *Scleranthus*, *Sorbus* and *Ulmus*; and in helping friends in various ways I have considered the taxonomy of *Alchemilla*, *Batrachian* *Ranunculi*, *Chenopodium*, *Potamogeton*, *Rubus* and *Taraxacum*. I have also spent much time studying ecotypic and geographical variation, in particular a comparison of those variants which occur on the coasts in dunes, shingle and salt-marsh with those growing as arable weeds, and those in mountains. Special attention has also been given to trees and shrubs.

It has long been my wish to publish this information in a critical flora of Great Britain and Ireland. In the 1970s a group of us tried to get a grant to carry this out, but we were unsuccessful. Clive Stace then started on his *New Flora of the British Isles*, which is now published. In it he gives only abbreviated descriptions and omits the large apomictic genera and most of the infraspecific variants. Many introduced species are included by Stace in a British and Irish flora for the first time, detailed descriptions and specimens of many of which are difficult to find. Stace's flora is to my mind an excellent field guide, which it would be difficult to better, but it does not give the detailed descriptions which are needed to confirm the identification of a plant which is new to you. A good description in my opinion is one in which a picture of the plant unfolds before you as you read it.

I considered it was possible for me to write a flora in five volumes which gave a full description of all the species in Stace's flora and to add all the apomicts and many of the infraspecific variants, but it was too large a task to attempt to include all the biological information envisaged by the group in the 1970s. It was necessary, however, to have the help of another author, who lived in Cambridge, to deal with the large amount of work involved. My eye fell upon Gina Murrell who had worked with me in the 1960s and 1970s, when writing accounts for *Flora Europaea*, *Flora of Turkey* and *Flora of the Maltese Islands*. The work of one had complemented the work of the other and we were able to criticise one another without antagonism. We started field work on this flora on the 13 May 1987, by describing *Ceratocarpus claviculata*, which was flowering on Dunwich Heath in Suffolk, in a snowstorm. Since then we have as far as possible spent one day a week working in the field or at the Botanic Garden, Cambridge. We started writing this volume in 1992, and completed it by Easter 1994.

I have done most of the writing and made the taxonomic and nomenclatural decisions, while Gina has done most of the measuring, sometimes sitting at the microscope dictating the description while I, surrounded by a pile of books, wrote it down, and she has set out and put the whole onto a computer. At the start of the second volume we have where possible reversed roles and I sit at the microscope and dictate the description which she puts straight onto the computer, a much faster method of working. Gina has also done all the illustrations and organised our field work.

Peter Sell