Bill Sykes: a botanist-activist

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A botanist for 40-odd years, Bill Sykes had his career path cemented by expeditions to the Himalayas. He has also been outspoken in social matters. He talks to DERRICK ROONEY.

OLD soldiers, it has often been said, never die, but only fade away. Older scientists do not even fade away when the pay cheques stop. They just go on working.

Bill Sykes, outspoken social critic, peace campaigner, and prominent New Zealand botanist, is the latest to join their ranks.

A veteran of nearly 30 years with the DSIR Botany Division, Bill Sykes was within a few months of retirement when the division was abolished last year, and did not transfer to the new Landcare Research institute which replaced it. Now he has officially retired (the occasion was marked by a seminar for which colleagues from around the country gathered at the Lincoln science centre), but neither event has made a lot of difference to his life style.

Like some of his former colleagues (including his first director in New Zealand), who are still working unofficially on major projects 10 years or more after their official termination, Bill Sykes has so much to finish that he refuses to let a minor matter like retirement stand in the way. Someone else is occupying his old office, but there are few days of the week on which he is not busy in the herbarium, comparing, collating, and identifying folios of plant specimens.

Bill Sykes's long career in botany began in 1950, when he was accepted as a horticultural student at the Royal Horticultural Society's famous Wisley Gardens.

He was a little older than the other students, and he had been around a bit. After leaving school at 15, he had worked for the mail-order seed firm, Thompson and Morgan, before being drafted into the British Navy in 1947. After his two years of military service, he was employed for a year in a market garden, under a Government scheme to find employment for demobilised people.

When he decided to make plants his career, he applied for — and was offered — studentships at both Wisley and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Kew was then, as now, widely regarded as the "world headquarters" of botany, but, says Bill Sykes, "I chose Wisley because it offered a more general horticultural course. And I liked the idea of living in a hostel within the gardens at Wisley."

The diploma course ran for two years. He stayed at Wisley for eight, largely as a consequence of an event in 1951: he was selected as a member of a three-man team sent to the Nepal Himalayas on the first of two botanical expeditions, to collect seeds and herbarium specimens.

The expeditions, he says, changed the whole direction of his career. "I saw quite clearly that what I wanted to be was a botanist."

The companions of the young Bill Sykes on those two classic forays, from which many new plants were introduced to cultivation, were perhaps not widely known outside horticultural circles, but among plantspeople they became household names. John

standard reference works on the floras of Britain, mainland Europe, and the Mediterranean, completed the trio. Adam Stainton replaced John Williams on the second expedition.

Had the first expedition left on time, its leader would have been Frank Ludlow, one of the great botanical explorers, who with Major George Sheriff had ranged the length of the Himalayas in the 1920s and 1930s, surveying its plants and wildlife, in a series of expeditions now regarded as classics.

However, the expedition was delayed for a year by a revolution in Nepal, and by the time it was safe for the Williams-Polunin-Sykes expedition to go, Ludlow, who was over 70, felt he was not up to it. "But he gave us a very good coaching," says Bill Sykes.

The coaching was not 100 per cent successful, however. During the first expedition, the youthful Bill Sykes contracted amoebic dysentery, and was "carried out half-dead in a basket. I had to do quite a bit of persuading to get the RHS to send me on the next expedition."

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Bill Sykes is now the only survivor of those expeditions, and when he met a present-day Himalayan botanical explorer, Chris Chadwick, a couple of years ago, he found himself regarded as a sort of guru of Himalayan botany. "I was like a living fossil to him."

In 1957 the newly wed Bill Sykes belatedly enrolled as a taxonomy student at London University. "We had a flat near Kew, and my wife worked as a horticulturist," he says. His ambition was to work as a taxonomist with the Himalayan flora, but he was much older than his fellow students, and when he graduated at the age of just over 30 he found that he was too old to become a scientist with the British Civil Service.

An offer came from Kew to work in its herbarium on the East African plant collection, but he declined. "I wanted to be able to get out and collect plants as well as working on them in the laboratory," he says.

Since this probably meant leaving England, he wrote to institutions in several countries, and the most interesting reply was from Eric Godley, then director of the DSIR Botany Division. Dr Godley offered him a chance to work with Arthur Healy on

The region included the Pacific Islands, and this led Bill Sykes to a new botanical interest: island floras.

As had happened in the Himalayas, his involvement with island floras was fortuitous. "I just happened to be in the right place at the right time." And, again as in the Himalayas, his island involvement started badly.

His first trip to the volcanic Raoul Island was cut short after two days when the island erupted. "We were rushed off the island, along with the meteorological people." Later, he returned to Raoul several times, and completed a botanical survey of the Kermadecs which is regarded as a classic of its kind.

Bill Sykes says he was "third choice" for the Raoul expedition. A year later, when the administrators of Niue wanted a botanist to survey the island, he got first preference. Since then, he has botanised extensively in the Pacific Islands, and has published a "Flora of Niue" and many scientific articles on island plants. He had partly finished writing a flora of the Cook Islands when funding for the project ran out, but may finish it as a private project.

Islands generally have smaller and less varied floras than continental land masses, and many people regard them as holding little interest. But island plants and animals include many examples of ways in which more widespread species have adapted to particular environments, and in so doing have created unique races. The classic example is the huge range of variation in the Galapagos finches, detailed by Charles Darwin in his thesis on evolution. For Bill Sykes, this aspect is one of the strong attractions of island floras.

The limited range of species within island floras is an equally strong, if seemingly anomalous, attraction to the taxonomist. "When you are dealing with a small flora," says Bill Sykes, "one person can get to grips with it and really understand its dynamics."

Cultivated and naturalised plants have been a 30-year personal as well as professional interest for Bill Sykes, and he has a remarkable knowledge of the plants that are, or have been, grown in New Zealand, and where they can be found. In the course of his research, he compiled a huge card-

New Zealand is a mecca of sorts for taxonomists interested in the mechanisms of plant naturalisation. Auckland reputedly has more naturalised plant species than any other city in the world, and in New Zealand as a whole the number of introduced plants (some would call them weeds) is approaching, and probably will eventually exceed, the number of native species. This was recognised with the publication in 1988 of the 1365-page fourth volume of the "Flora of New Zealand", which described all the known naturalised plants. With Colin Webb and Phil Garnock-Jones, Bill Sykes was co-author of this volume.

He is now completing a study of naturalised bamboos for the forthcoming fifth volume, being written by two other "retired" colleagues, Elizabeth Edgar and Henry Connor. When this is eventually published, it will fill a big gap in New Zealand botanical literature — the last comprehensive flora dealing with the grasses dates from the 1920s.

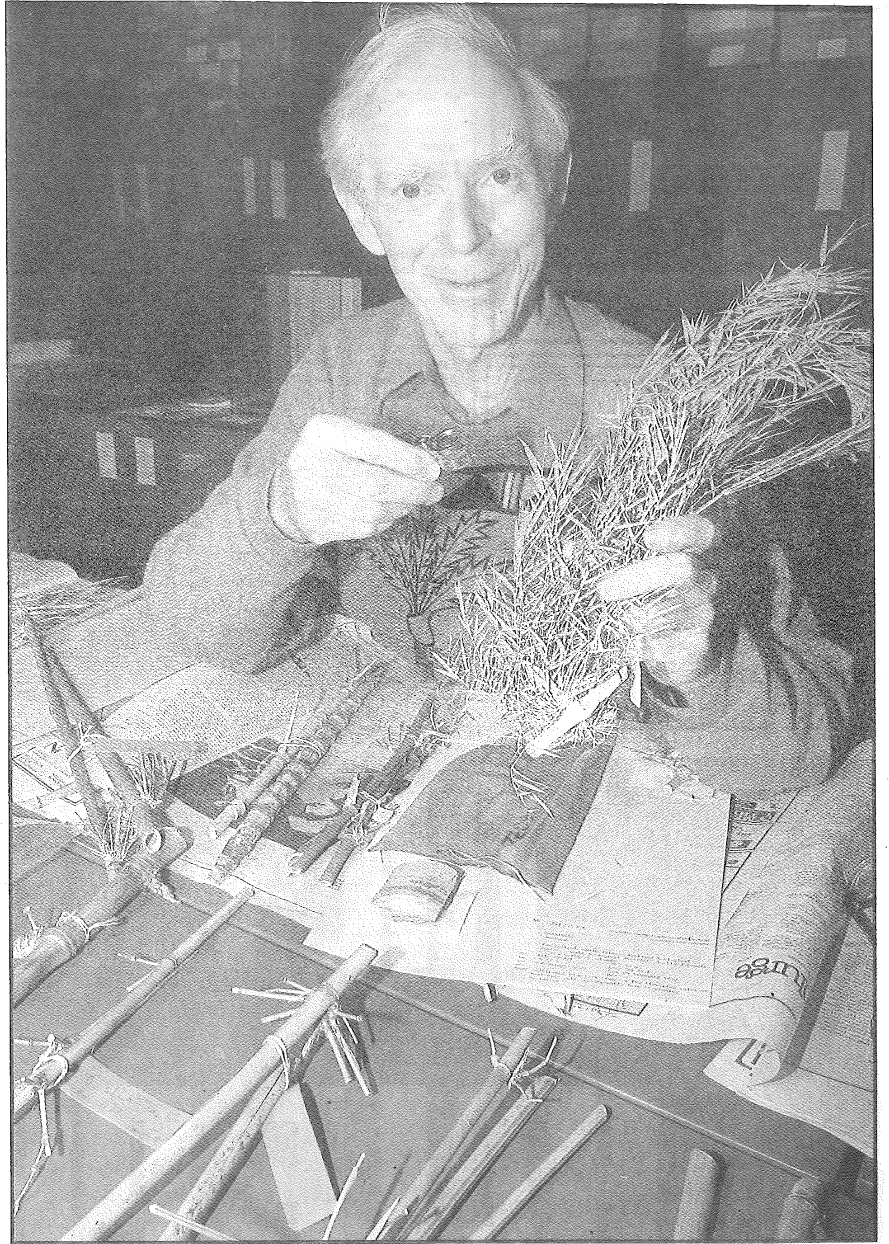
Although most people regard bamboos as shrubs, they are really large to very large grasses. They do not readily naturalise in the dry Canterbury climate, but in the warm, wet north, where bamboos are often used for shelter planting, a number of species have "escaped". For a variety of reasons, their taxonomy is difficult.

Bamboo plants flower infrequently, and many of them die after flowering. It can be difficult, sometimes nearly impossible, to find characters by which the different species in New Zealand can be identified (plant classification is largely based on flowers and fruit). Even in their countries of origin (mostly in Asia) many bamboo species have not been well described. Some have been described under different names in different countries. All this presents a challenge to the taxonomist, but Bill Sykes is the sort of botanist who thrives on a challenge.

Outside science, he has a passion for peace and social justice.

A long-time anti-nuclear activist (he was one of the original Aldermaston CND marchers in the 1950s), he joined the campaign against nuclear ships in New Zealand, and at the inquiry made submissions on the dangers and difficulties of dealing with nuclear wastes.

A frequent correspondent to "The Press", Bill Sykes is known for his outspoken views on other issues, including racial discrimination and homosexual law reform. In 1981 he was an active opponent of the Springbok tour, and wore a HART (Halt All Racist Tours) badge on his lapel. "There were some people in this august institution (DSIR) whose blood curdled at the sight of me walking about wearing that badge," he says.



Bill Sykes in his herbarium with Chusquea bamboo from Chile. — *Photograph by ANNETTE DEW*

opponent of the Avon loop development, which he considers ill-advised.

More recently, he has become deeply concerned about overpopulation. "Our whole environment is being affected by the simple fact of an excess of human numbers," he says.

His partner, Peggy, is involved in the family-planning movement, and he says people must do more to limit population growth. This message was brought home strongly to him when he spent six months working as an exchange scientist in China, where couples are discouraged, by legal discrimination, from having more than one child.

The Chinese policy on families represents a great dilemma, he says. It is very harsh, but probably the only

raises a lot of opposition and antagonism," he says, "but it is the only thing we can do to save this planet."

Although his habit of speaking his mind on what he saw as social and moral issues often caused raised eyebrows among his more conservative colleagues, he says no attempt was ever made to "muzzle" him. "But I never involved myself with controversial local environmental issues in which the department or the Government may have had an interest. So I never needed to cross swords with the establishment.

"Now it is different. I am officially out of the system. There could be a local ecological cause that I would take up."

An issue on which Bill Sykes did

plant specimens sent in by both State agencies and individuals. A minor part of this was forensic botany — identifying plant specimens which were to be exhibits in legal proceedings. If the specimens were cannabis, he refused to work with them.

It was, essentially, a moral stand. Bill Sykes, non-smoker, non-drinker, and vegetarian, simply disagreed with the laws on cannabis.

"There is a great deal of hypocrisy in the way we treat cannabis against tobacco and alcohol," he says.

This small step out of line caused little disruption, because other taxonomists were available in the department to make the necessary identifications. However, it was typical of the way in which Bill Sykes,