

Eric Classey: Entomologist, publisher and antiquarian bookseller who discovered the Burren Green moth

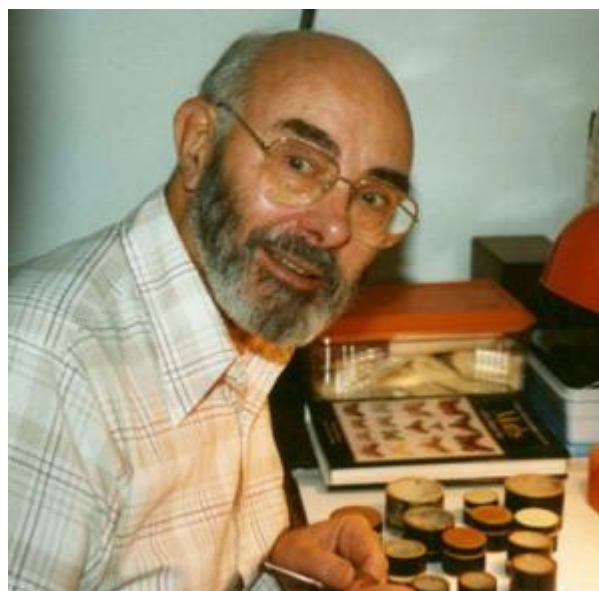
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Eric Classey was one of the last of the old-style entomologists. He was revered both as an authority on British moths and butterflies and also as an antiquarian bookseller noted for his generosity to impoverished entomologists. He was founder, editor and publisher of the *Entomologist's Gazette*, a quarterly journal on British insects, and served on most of the senior entomological societies and institutions. In a sense he devoted his whole professional life to the service of brother entomologists.

Classey's name will forever be associated with a particularly beautiful species of moth known as the Burren Green. The first specimen of this bright green moth was found near Gort in Co Galway in 1949. Classey identified it as a continental species known only by its then scientific name, *Luceria virens*. Realising that it was unlikely to be a stray, Classey organised the first entomological expedition to the Burren in western Ireland.

Despite storms, sickness and other mishaps – all written up in detail in the *Entomologist's Gazette* – Classey and his companions succeeded in solving the mystery. A newly emerged specimen of the new species was found drying its wings and a little judicious digging unearthed its empty pupa case, thus confirming that it was indeed a resident breeding species. Classey wanted to give the moth an Irish name,



Classey: a limitless fund of terrible jokes, often with an entomological context

the Claddagh, meaning sea-beach, but other counsels prevailed. Each night when the party went nothing in the Burren they were joined by up to 30 curious locals who "came to see the gentlemen catching flies".

Classey's enthusiasm for the chase was such that he was known to leave his favourite tippie, a mint julep, in order to spring for a butterfly net and race full tilt across the lawn in pursuit of a new specimen. During the 1930s he collected moths in the countryside around London, mainly by sugaring trees with a bait of treacle and alcohol, or by shining a Tilley lamp on a ground sheet. He had a seemingly limitless fund of terrible jokes as well as entomological stories; in fact the two were often combined.

Classey was a quick-talking, precise man with definite, generally conservative, opinions. On collecting expeditions he seemed to friends to scarcely sleep at all, being busy with butterflies all day and moths all night. He regarded any non-entomological sightseeing or bathing as slacking. In 1983 he was elected a member of the exclusive Entomological Club, the world's oldest entomological society which is restricted to around 15 distinguished members. That same year he was introduced to the Queen during celebrations for the half-centenary of the Royal Entomological Society.

Eric Classey was born in Queen's Park, London in 1916 and educated locally at Essendine Road School, which he left aged 14. After working as a biological assistant at St Mary's Hospital Medical School, he found a more congenial post in the specimen-setting room of the Natural History Museum, working mainly on beetles. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and worked in its Entomological Laboratory at Mytchett in Surrey, studying malarial mosquitoes and teaching newly fledged doctors the mysteries of medical and forensic entomology.

After the Second World War, Classey was offered the post of manager of the famous naturalists' supply business, Watkins & Doncaster. In its cramped Dickensian premises above a barber's shop in the Strand, Classey was in his element, meeting all the best-known entomologists of the day and exchanging field lore.

One of his main concerns was to revitalise amateur entomology after the decline of the war years. Classey's solution was a new journal, the *Entomologist's Gazette*, which he founded with Richard Ford. The *Gazette* broke precedent by charting new records, expeditions and discoveries in the chatty style of a magazine. It was a modest success and continues today. Classey was its first editor, and soon afterwards its publisher. Though he gave up the editorship in 1960, he continued to contribute articles about collecting trips and entomological history, and was a member of its editorial board almost to the end of his life.

From 1950, with the help of his wife, Ivy, Classey built up a home-based business in new, antiquarian and second-hand books and periodicals on natural history, specialising in entomology. In 1959, E.W. Classey became a limited company. Using his contacts in Britain and abroad, Classey was able to purchase deceased entomologists' libraries, and, in effect, recycle rare books within the entomological community. With his shrewd eye for business combined with a thorough knowledge of second-hand books, Classey's thrice-yearly catalogues became a focus for libraries, universities, museums and other research institutions throughout the world.

In 1973 the Classeys, together with their daughter Sally, moved from Middlesex to Faringdon, Oxfordshire, from where they continued to publish and sell books, mainly as a mail-order business. In 1976, Sally left to start a family and their son Peter joined the company. After his beloved Ivy ("Ive") died in 1982, Peter took over the day-to-day running while Eric concentrated on the antiquarian side. The business finally closed in 2005.

As a publisher, Classey traded either under his company name or as Heder Press, named after the scientific name of ivy, in honour of his wife. Using his contacts and knowledge of the entomological world he was able to find a market for worthwhile books and booklets of value to entomology that would normally be unsaleable, for example, *Butterflies and Moths of Shetland* (excluding Fair Isle) by MG Pennington, published in 1991, and *The Lepidoptera of the Orkney Islands* and a *Bibliography of the Entomology of the Smaller British Offshore Islands*, both published in 1983.

He also reprinted deserving out-of-print titles like Philip Corbet's *A Biology of Dragonflies* and Norman Joy's *A Practical Handbook of British Beetles*, as well as Vincent Holt's jeu d'esprit *Why Not Eat Insects?* Among Classey's most ambitious projects as a publisher was *Moths of North America North of Mexico*. The first volume appeared in 1971; many volumes later, the work is still in production.

Early on in his career he decided to present his fine collection of moths to the Natural History Museum. However he remained keenly interested in small and difficult moths (microlepidoptera) from Britain and around the world, again presenting collections to the Museum. More formally he was Chairman of the Cockayne Trust at the Museum, responsible for improvements to the national collection of butterflies and moths and promoting the study of insects. He was also appointed vice-president of the Lepidopterists' Society in the US in 2000.

Another of Classey's passions was for wild orchids; he succeeded in finding all but one of the British species. Friends noticed that his collection mania extended to keeping boxes of stamps from his business correspondence. Characteristically he gave them away to stamp-collecting children.

Classey was gregarious and hospitable, and was visited by a stream of overseas entomologists whom he would take on sightseeing trips of London. He was an accomplished ballroom dancer, a fearsome opponent at Scrabble, an eager genealogist and a Gilbert and Sullivan aficionado. He served as a magistrate in Middlesex and was an active freemason.

He is perhaps remembered above all for his generosity. He gave away many rare specimens and books. His friend Barry Goater remembers how, "in my early and impecunious days he would ring me up to say he had a book he knew I needed, and that I could pay him when I could. Among my most treasured possessions are the two volumes of *Culot* [an expensive, hand-coloured French work on moths] which he inscribed in front of me: 'In the event of my demise, this book belongs to Barry Goater'. Shortly after that he said, 'Look, you will find them useful now. Take them'. I know I was not the only one to have been helped in this way".

Peter Marren

Eric William Classey, entomologist, publisher and bookseller: born London 2 November 1916; director, E.W. Classey Ltd 1951-2005; Editor, Entomologist's Gazette 1952-60; married 1939 Ivy Ash (died 1982; three sons, one daughter); died Gloucester 7 September 2008.

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