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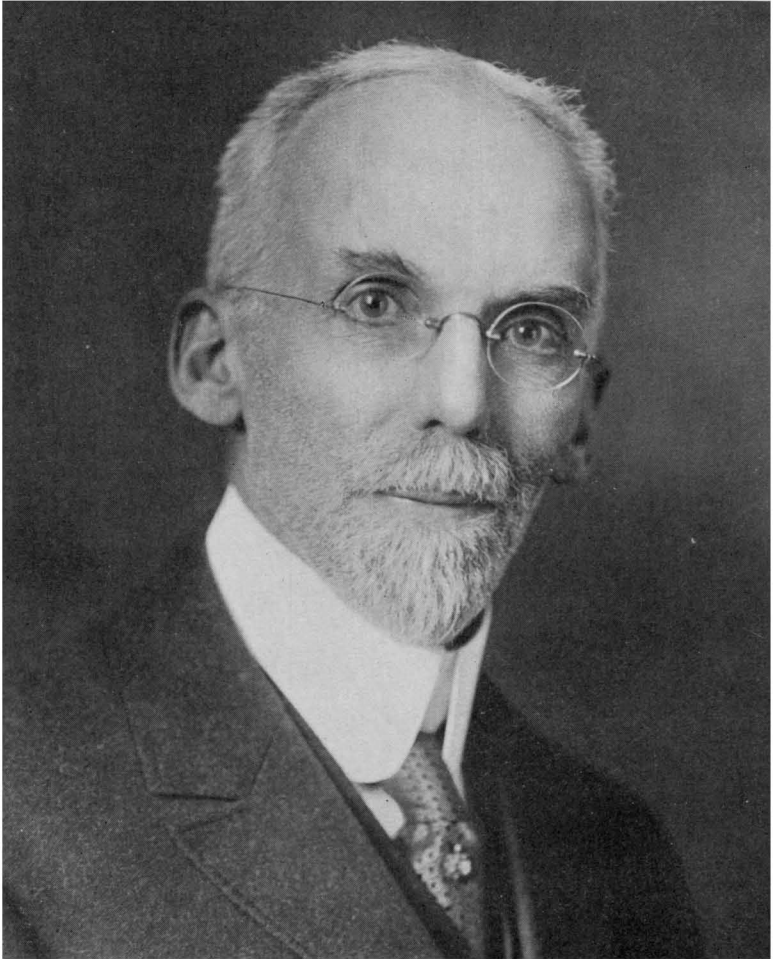
BENJAMIN LINCOLN ROBINSON

1864-1935

BY

M. L. FERNALD

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B. L. Robinson.

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Benjamin Lincoln Robinson was born at Bloomington, Illinois, November 8, 1864, the son of James Harvey and Latricia Maria (Drake) Robinson, and died at his summer home in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, July 27, 1935. His ancestry both on his father's and his maternal grandmother's side was chiefly of English protestant stock who early immigrated to colonial Massachusetts, he being a descendant in the eighth generation from the Rev. John Robinson, a Puritan pastor at Leyden. His maternal grandfather, the Rev. Benjamin Bradner Drake, born at Borodine, New York, was in part descended from Scotch Irish stock which had settled in New York State about 1735. The parents of Benjamin Lincoln Robinson, both born in New York State, settled in Illinois about 1840, the father there engaging in business and becoming the president of the First National Bank in Bloomington.

Benjamin was the youngest of eight children. He was educated at home until his tenth year, then for six years in the public schools of his native city. Thereafter he prepared for college at the Illinois Normal School at Normal, where he came under the stimulating instruction of Edward J. James, later distinguished as president of the University of Illinois. In the autumn of 1883 Robinson entered Williams College; but, finding the opportunities there to specialize in botany less than he had anticipated, he remained only three months and returned home and prepared himself for Harvard College, which he entered the following autumn. At Harvard he devoted himself chiefly to scientific studies, with special attention to botany under the guidance of Goodale and Farlow, graduating (A. B.) in 1887. Immediately after graduation, on June 29, 1887, he married, at Hennepin, Illinois, Margaret Louise Casson, daughter of William Henry and Mary Ann (MacMahon) Casson, a woman of great social activity and musical accomplishment,

who later, in Cambridge, became prominent through her energetic opposition to social trends which she felt to be detrimental.

In the summer of 1887 the young couple went to Europe, Robinson starting in October his graduate studies with Graf zu Solms-Laubach at the University of Strasburg, majoring in botany, with minors in geology and mineralogy. His dissertation, in the field of plant-anatomy, led to his Ph. D. in 1889; and after a brief period of study under Strasburger at Bonn, he returned to Cambridge in the autumn of 1890 and became assistant to Sereno Watson, the Curator of the Gray Herbarium of Harvard University. The Robinsons returned to Cambridge with keen enthusiasm for Germanic culture and from 1891 to 1894 Robinson conducted a course at Harvard in scientific German.

On the death of the venerable and kindly Sereno Watson, in 1892, Robinson, then in his 29th year, was appointed to the curatorship; and from that time until his death his work for and at the Herbarium was essentially continuous, except for frequent absences due to frail health and six trips to Europe, partly for special botanical studies in the great herbaria there. During all this time the present writer was closely associated with him, having come to the Gray Herbarium as junior assistant to Sereno Watson in the spring of 1891. He may, therefore, write of certain of Robinson's traits, works and ambitions from an intimate knowledge of them.

At the time of his appointment as Curator, the Gray Herbarium was an adjunct of the Harvard Botanic Garden, the two, during the active life of Asa Gray, having been interdependent and with mutual scientific significance. Soon after Robinson, of a newer generation not associated with the botanical activities of Gray, took charge of the Herbarium, the Director of the Garden, who was also then active in his phenomenal development of the Botanical Museum, found it inexpedient to secure the funds for so many needy establishments and in 1897 asked that the Gray Herbarium look in the future for its own support. This critical situation is clearly described by Robinson himself:

“Until the middle 'nineties the Herbarium held, with respect

to its support, a rather anomalous position. Though entered in the Treasurer's Report in the College accounts along with Appleton Chapel and the Hemenway Gymnasium, it was in no way financed by the College. The public, on the other hand, very naturally supposed the Herbarium to be a part of the Garden and supported by it. Yet it never received any income from that source, though the Garden with the utmost fairness shared with it such gifts for current expenses as were contributed by a joint Visiting Committee. In 1897, Goodale, then Director of the Garden and Botanical Museum and thus responsible for the still precarious support of both, decided that he could be of no further aid to the Herbarium, and requested that it might be provided with a committee of its own, and henceforth recognized as an independent establishment by the Governing Boards. That course was immediately taken.

"This was the most critical period for the Herbarium. From interest on its fund and from diminishing returns on copyrights bequeathed by Gray, it had an income of about \$3600, scarcely half the annual expenses, which could not be reduced without seriously damaging the interests of the scientific collections.

"These matters were laid before the newly appointed Visiting Committee, a strong and sympathetic group. Most of its members had been personal friends of Gray, or had studied in his classes. The Committee took immediate and helpful interest. By gifts for present use the existing difficulties were relieved. Attention was then turned to endowment in order to assure the future. Within a few months the Curator was able to announce to the Committee an offer (at the time anonymously made by Mrs. Gray) of the sum of twenty thousand dollars to endow an Asa Gray Professorship of Systematic Botany, a position to be united with the curatorship of the Herbarium. The offer was conditional on the raising of thirty thousand dollars as an Asa Gray Memorial Fund for the further endowment of the Herbarium. Somewhat more than this sum was raised by June, 1899, the proposed memorial professorship was founded, and Robinson was appointed as its first incumbent."

Only those who knew Robinson's natural reserve and sensitiveness, his quiet dignity and scholarly training and his high

scientific ambitions can realize the dread he had of directly asking financial aid for himself and his work. The anomalous and almost resented position of some of the important and internationally famous research establishments of the University perpetually disturbed him. He naturally felt, as did many of his associates, that, when Harvard University accepted the Gray Herbarium as one of its integral parts, its obligation should not have ceased with merely the cordial acceptance of the gift. Such, however, was the attitude of the University administration and all research establishments not directly under the faculties of instruction were then and still are left to starve or to beg outside the University. Although utterly lacking the cheer-leading and "hail-fellow-well-met" approach of the ordinary canvasser, and handicapped by a manner somewhat stiff and over-formal as well as by a subject with little spectacular appeal, Robinson, rising to the necessities of the situation and aided by loyal friends, won by his sincerity and his unselfish loyalty to his unappreciative University, the aid of a small group of helpers; and at the close of his curatorship he had been instrumental in increasing the endowment of the Gray Herbarium from \$18,155 to \$526,000. That in itself, in view of the perpetual handicaps, was a major contribution to systematic botany, but the nervous strain and worry involved were tremendous.

When he took over the care of the Gray Herbarium the fame of the establishment abroad was already great, through the monumental studies for many years by Asa Gray, the painstaking and invaluable papers of Watson and the pioneer publications of their young assistants and advanced students, L. H. Bailey, Kingo Miyabe, and others. The young Curator, starting in with a boy-assistant, had a major task to bring his institution up to the famous position it had previously occupied. Cautious in the selection of assistants in this work and prevented by the financial restrictions already referred to from maintaining and promoting a staff of expert workers, as is done in the large herbaria of the Old World, Robinson utilized all available young men of real promise until the pressure of limitation of funds forced their release to more remunerative positions elsewhere. Thus, for more than forty years, the scientific studies

and output were maintained and many of our leading botanists have gone out to their life-work with at least a few years of the training which their temporary assistantships had furnished. The closing years of Robinson's administration found the Gray Herbarium ranking as one of the seven leading research establishments of the world in its field of systematic botany, with the Curator and members of the staff bringing to the University more than the old quota of world-recognition as outstanding scientists.

Robinson's first task of purely scientific character was the editing and completion of extended manuscripts left by Gray and by Watson. These were chiefly portions of the *Synoptical Flora of North America*. After several years devoted to this work it became evident that the task of carrying forward to completion the *Synoptical Flora* was too vast for a single man drafted into the enterprise and with essentially no help.

During the progress of this work and while gaining a familiarity with the invaluable content of the Gray Herbarium and the irreplaceable records of close scientific study of its material, Robinson became more and more impressed with the tremendous loss to science should the collections (hay-dry plants mounted on paper and kept in dusty wooden cabinets in a building of brick and wood) or the building catch fire. Accordingly his efforts turned to a new problem. He endeavored to make a combination of the Gray Herbarium, situated on its historic site, with the Cryptogamic Herbarium (now the Farlow Herbarium), which was then housed in the Museum building. For nine years he vainly pushed this ambition for a joint building in the neighborhood of the Museums and Biological Laboratories; then, having received little encouragement, and the absolute congestion of the material in the Gray Herbarium needing relief, he was forced to development on the old site. Through friends of the establishment the original building was gradually rebuilt as a noncombustible structure, setting the highest standards of equipment, lighting and arrangement for its special purpose. This new building, already outgrown, though erected between 1909 and 1915, was almost wholly of Robinson's planning. Finding that the plans drawn up by an assigned architect called for large expenditures for adornments and needless ex-

tras, Robinson took matters into his own hands, drew the plans himself, studied and prepared specifications for the furnishings and finally, with the collaboration of a young architect who saw the value of the non-professional plans, put through a building which is cited in Europe and in many parts of America as a model for its purpose. I intentionally dwell upon Robinson's connection with the architectural plans because their preparation and execution were for several years his life, and his friends all recognized that the building which houses the Gray Herbarium was to him as a dearly loved child.

During the first half of his curatorship the demand for a revision of Gray's *Manual of Botany* became urgent. Accordingly, with the collaboration of the present writer, this task was undertaken and a new edition was issued in 1908. In these years Robinson's original publications were based largely on collections brought back by various explorers from Mexico and the Galapagos Islands; but gradually it became apparent that the herbaria of the United States lacked adequate reference material from the vast continent of South America. Prompt to recognize the need, Robinson effected coöperation with the New York Botanical Garden and the United States National Museum and, later, with other institutions, an intensive botanical exploration in various significant sections of South America was begun. The coöperation of the South American botanists was also enlisted, largely through Robinson's younger associates, Drs. Ivan M. Johnston and Lyman B. Smith, who had each visited South American countries, and a mutual exchange of great importance thus established.

In 1895 Robinson, joining Farlow, Goodale, Thaxter, and a small group of amateurs, founded the New England Botanical Club, of which he served as president from 1906 to 1908. From its beginning in 1899 through 1928 (thirty volumes) he was editor-in-chief of the Club's journal, *Rhodora*, a noteworthy scientific publication in its special field.

During his later years he became more and more absorbed in monographic studies in the vast *Eupatorium* tribe of the family *Compositae*. Himself not an active field-botanist, he nevertheless stimulated others to assemble material in his chosen

group, maintaining that the material already assembled and unorganized in the world's great herbaria and such new material as naturally came in from explorers in the American tropics was more than he could ever handle. Searching through the dust-covered bundles of specimens in Paris or elsewhere he would unearth unstudied material of his group which sometimes had lain unnoticed for a century or more, since its collection in then undeveloped areas of South America. Such old and forgotten collections of the past explorers were his delight and at the time of his death he was looking forward to years of study of the series of *Eupatorium* and its allies sent for critical and authoritative comparisons from the great herbaria of England, France and Germany.

Reference has been made to Robinson not being a field-botanist. In his youth he apparently did some field-work, and in 1894 he organized and carried through a collecting trip to Newfoundland. In the early days of the New England Botanical Club he went frequently on short local trips, and he greatly enjoyed the companionship of friends in the field; but he tired easily and was often forced to forego comparatively simple excursions. Gradually his field-work became restricted to pastimes in periods of enforced winter or early spring vacations in Bermuda or in the South, where he went to recuperate after serious pulmonary or related difficulties. But, although forced by his frail constitution to refrain from the most active of field-work, Robinson was always ready to encourage exploration of serious and obviously intelligent character. Many young men owe much to his readiness to aid or to seek aid for their enterprises and many important series of specimens are the result of his foresight in encouraging their collection.

Robinson did not take part in active instruction in botany at Harvard; but he guided toward the doctorate a number of graduate students and he did much to form the literary style and train the appreciation of it in many of our best scientific workers. With a keen feeling for language, both classical and modern, furthered by unusual familiarity with the best in the world's literature (including Russian and other non-latin literatures) and art, himself being an amateur musician, he abhorred

the sloppy and crude form or lack of finish in much that finds publication in scientific journals. Papers for publication under his editorial eye were truly edited and many an author of a technical article may well have been surprised, if he had the perception to note it, by the finished style in which his badly written contribution appeared in print. So conscientious was Robinson, that he would spend many evenings simply rewriting or recasting articles for publication in *Rhodora*; and his graduate students and assistants, especially if their mastery of English was deficient, went through a vigorous training which made their finished work fully worthy of their master.

To those who met Robinson only casually his outstanding traits were reserve or shyness and a formal courtesy reminiscent of an earlier epoch. His unfailing courtesy and his consideration for others were appreciated by those who were his daily associates. Forced against his wish to restrict expansion and to trim his institutional activities to the limits of a very limited budget, his adverse decisions were always graciously announced and the affection and loyalty of his group of workers always maintained. In fact, one who has had much executive experience in many lands thus wrote of him:

“Quiet, unassuming, courteous in the extreme, a conscientious and efficient worker, a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, Dr. Robinson will be missed by his colleagues and associates at Harvard, by that large group of botanists who were trained at Cambridge during his long tenure of office, and by that larger group of American and foreign botanists who have had the privilege of working for shorter or longer periods with the treasures of the Gray Herbarium. Under Dr. Robinson’s leadership the Gray Herbarium attained a spirit of “Gemütlichkeit” unequalled in any other botanical institution with which I am personally familiar. The loss of his services to botanical science is a heavy one, but he leaves behind him a magnificent record of accomplishment.”

Another, the former Keeper of Botany at the British Museum, has stated a similar impression:

“I remember no more welcome or charming visitor to the British Museum than B. I. Robinson, whose long service to

floristic botany at Harvard was closed by death on July 27. . . . One remembers also his tactful co-operation at certain Botanical Congresses, especially at Vienna, in 1905, where he represented the more stable school of nomenclature as opposed to the somewhat revolutionary Neo-American School. But that is ancient history. There are also pleasant memories of a day at Boston, after the Ithaca Congress in 1926, when Robinson did the honours of the Gray Herbarium, the last word in safety—furniture and fittings all of steel as on a battleship—and organized equipment.”

Robinson, as so gracefully stated by Rendle, was well known and highly respected in the leading botanical centers of Europe; he had made six trips abroad for scientific purposes, studying in the great herbaria at Kew, the British Museum, Paris, Geneva, Vienna, Berlin and Copenhagen. At home he had served as president of the Botanical Society of America (1900), as vice-president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1905) and as president of the New England Botanical Club (1906-1908). He was a member of the Commission internationale de Nomenclature botanique at the International Botanical Congress at Vienna (1905), a vice-president of the International Congress at Brussels (1910) and a member of the Commission de Nomenclature générale appointed at Ithaca (1926).

Besides being active in the organizations already mentioned, he was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, of the Washington Academy of Sciences, of the Boston Society of Natural History, of the Vermont Botanical Club, of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society and of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, a corresponding member of the Deutsche Botanische Gesellschaft, of the Botanischer Verein der Provinz Brandenburg, of the Société botanique de Genève, of the Czechoslovakian Botanical Society, a foreign member of the Linnean Society of London and of the Societas pro Fauna et Flora Fennica, honorary member of the Chilean Society of Natural History, honorary academician of the Museum of the National University

of La Plata, and correspondent of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

In 1904 he received the bronze medal of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis and in 1929 the Centennial Gold Medal of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society "for eminent service to botany."

For many years suffering from obscure pulmonary difficulties and, consequently, frail and appearing older than his years, in 1931 Robinson had a critical illness from which he never really rallied. The death of Mrs. Robinson in May, 1932, still further broke him; but he recovered sufficiently to continue his work interruptedly, though his weakness was distressingly apparent to his associates and friends. He died peacefully at his summer home, his mind, during his last illness, constantly on the Eupatoriums and the Gray Herbarium, the two great interests to which, up to the last, he hoped to return.

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