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Biographical Note on Persoon

By CHESTER R. BENJAMIN

Although the name and works of Christian Hendrik Persoon are well known to most botanists, the biography of this illustrious mycologist is not. This fact is attributable to the following reasons: the dearth of accurate information; incompleteness of any biographical account; and the difficulty involved in finding that material which is available. An attempt is made here to alleviate this situation.

Persoon's only biographer was Antoine L. A. Fée, who published his article in 1846 in the *Giornale botanico italiano compilato per cura della sezione botanica dei congressi scientifici italiani*, of Philippe Parlatore (2nd year, vol. 1, part 3). This biography is found translated from the original Italian into French by Mme. M. Rousseau and entitled "Notice sur Persoon" in the *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Botanique de Belgique*, Vol. 30, part 2, pp. 50-60, 1891. This translation was used for the article entitled "Persoon" by C. G. Lloyd in his *Mycological Writings*, 1: 158-160, 1904. (*Mycological Notes*, No. 16). Parentage, vital statistics, and youth of Persoon are given by Len Verwoerd in an article entitled "The ancestors of Christiaan Hendrik Persoon", published in Lloyd's *Mycological Writings*, 7: 1301-1303. 1924. (*Mycological Notes*, No. 73.). Verwoerd's article, based on records found in the Cape Archives of the Union of South Africa, corrects misinformation concerning parentage and dates given by Fée and reproduced by Lloyd for lack of more accurate material.

The Italian journal in which Fée published was very rare when the French translation was published. Now, the Belgian journal is somewhat rare. Because of this inaccessibility, those portions of Fée's biography of Persoon not reproduced by Lloyd are reproduced here.

According to Fée, Persoon was large, lean, bony, with long legs and long arms attached to an uncomely body; his head large, supported by a small neck and tilted over awkward shoulders; his skin red, scaly, and covered with pale blemishes; his scanty hair grizzled, waving over a forehead wrinkled and bunched; his enormous mouth containing a small number of shaky teeth and always full of saliva, much of which escaped in jets with each word he spoke; his eyes grey and watery, half-opened and almost lost behind promi-

ment, puffy cheeks; his ears enormous and directed forward; and his face wrinkled and without expression. He was coarsely clad. His clothes were bizarre of form and strange of color, worn through by long service. He often lacked many of the most common necessities.

He loved with a botanist's passion both living and dried plants, though his awkward hand tore them in the gardens or broke them in herbariums. Surprised in flagrant offense at a public garden, he was warned several times by the gardener to no avail and he lost much in the public estimate. However, he possessed an outstanding reputation as author of the first reasonable classification of the fungi, of the first synopsis treating these organisms, as well as of a manual published in Paris, in which he described more than 22,000 plants and of which the diagnoses are regarded as a model of conciseness and exactitude. A mycology of Europe, a treatment of the edible fungi, and a number of memoirs on various scientific subjects established his reputation on a firm foundation. He was regarded as one of the foremost botanists of Europe and considered, particularly by the Germans, as the "prince of mycologists".

Desiring to relieve Persoon's financial distress but knowing his fierce pride toward accepting gratuitous aid, Fée suggested to the naturalist that he exchange his herbarium for a pension from the Dutch government. Toward this end, Persoon was asked by Fée to provide him with a note in which were formulated his propositions. That note, as translated from Rousseau's translation is as follows:

1. Having been born at the Cape of Good Hope, I have always considered myself a Dutch subject and I reserve my affection for this nation which has at all times distinguished itself by its wisdom as by its work in all aspects of industry and in all branches of human knowledge.
2. I have sought to contribute to the glory of this state by a life without blemish and by these very numerous scientific works, all of which have been favorably acclaimed and which have perhaps contributed to the progress of botany in a branch heretofore little known, that is to say, the cryptogamic.
3. Until the present time, I have found in the work the means of satisfying the immediate necessities of life, but being already much advanced in age and the spirit having tired, I have the fear of seeing dried up the source which now permits me to provide for my subsistence.
4. Devoid of all inheritance and not seeing any employment at all which will give me a fixed income, I am filled with anxiety for the future; I fear that an unforeseen illness would compel me to be inactive. Because of these considerations, and also through foresight, I am taking the liberty of addressing myself with confidence to the paternal government of H.M. the King of Netherlands who protects and encourages so effectively the sciences and the arts, in the end of obtaining a modest, but sufficient, pension in order to uphold the dignity of my name; a pension which, moreover, would not be paid for very long because I am old and infirm.

5. Not wishing, however, to owe this favor to beneficence, I agree voluntarily to give up, for utilization by and perhaps also the decoration of a scientific institute, my herbarium which has cost me the work of all my life at much expense and infinite care for its preservation.
6. If this proposition is acceptable, as I hope, to the government, I will immediately put my herbarium in condition to be entrusted to whomever will be charged with receiving it.

This note was probably written in 1824, and the subsequent annual pension of about \$350.00 was paid until Persoon's death in 1836. The herbarium was sent first to Brussels, and thence to Leyden.

The complete list of mycological books by Persoon, as sent by Saccardo to Mme. Rousseau and listed by her in the 1891 publication, are as follows:

- 1796-99. *Observationes mycologicae seu descriptiones tam novarum quam notabilium fungorum*. Lipsiae, 2 vol. 8°, 12 tab.
1797. *Commentatis de fungis clavaeformibus sistens specierum hucusque notarum descriptiones*. Lipsiae, 1 vol. 8°, 4 tab.
1797. *Tentamen dispositionis methodicae fungorum in classes, ordines, genera et familias, cum suppl.* Lipsiae, 1 vol. 8°, 4 tab.
- 1798-1800. *Icones et descriptiones fungorum minus cognitorum*. Lipsiae, 2 fasc. 4°, 14 tab.
1800. *Commentarius Dom. J. C. Schaefferi Fungorum Bavariae indigenorum icones illustrans*. Erlangae, 1 fasc. 4°.
1801. *Synopsis methodica fungorum*. Goettingae, 2 partes 8°, 5 tab.
- 1803-06. *Icones pictae variorum fungorum*. Parisiis, 4 fasc. 4°, 24 tab.
- 1805-07. *Synopsis plantarum, seu Enchiridium botanicum, complectens enumerationem systematicum specierum hucusque cognitarium*. Pharisii, Tubingae, 2 vol. 12.
1809. *Memoire sur les Vespe-loups ou Lycoperdon*. *Journal de botanique*, t. II (1809), pp. 5-31 avec 1 pl.
1818. *Traité sur les champignons comestibles*. Paris, 1 vol. 8°, 4 tab.
- 1822-28. *Mycologia europaea seu completa omnium fungorum in variis Europae regionibus detectorum enumeratio*. Erlangae, 3 vol. 8°, 30 tab. (Opus non absolutum).

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