

# **RESOLUTION OF RESPECT**

**EDGAR NELSON TRANSEAU 1875-1960**

**President (1924) of the E.S.A.**

The greatest contribution of Edgar Nelson Transeau is not, so far as I know, a matter of record. I do not refer to his important technical studies of the algae and of vegetation, his administrative skill in transforming a small department of botany into a large one abreast of modern science, or even to his work of intellectual synthesis and practical reforms in the teaching of general botany. In all of these respects, as well as in the development of a group of able botanists, he was pre-eminent.

But quietly and steadily through the years his classes in ecology attracted serious future specialists in a wide range of pure and applied biology. As a result one encounters entomologists, agronomists, foresters, soil scientists, teachers and investigators in many fields

whose horizons have been broadened by him during their apprenticeship at Ohio State University.

Such individuals show a lively respect for ecology. As a result they see their own activities in a perspective too often lacking. And thanks to Transeau's rigorous, often Socratic method of teaching, they have enjoyed a remarkable discipline in clarity of thought and expression, in sound and critical techniques both laboratory and field. This service, whose benefits range far beyond the confines of botany, I rate as Transeau's greatest.

Edgar Nelson Transeau was born at Williamsport, Pennsylvania in 1875. His French name was adopted by German ancestors who crossed the Rhine during the turmoil of a past century, possibly the Thirty Years' War. He was graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in 1897 and never tired of expressing his debt to a professor whom he affectionately referred to as "Dutchy." In fact, his gratitude to teachers and colleagues whom he respected, for example Cowles, Coulter, Salisbury, and Adams was remarkable in a man so little effusive and so solid in his own right. This admiration extended to good administrators and editors with whom he had worked. At the same time his less favorable appraisals of other characters were acute, just and—it must be confessed—often highly entertaining.

Transeau's professional training was divided between the universities of Chicago (1900-1901) and Michigan, where he received his doctorate in 1904, his thesis being a study on bogs of the Huron River Valley. Unless I have been misinformed, this classic work was carried on in spite of a then skeptical view of ecology at Michigan. Doubtless he was buoyed up through it by his previously more congenial experience at Chicago.

Following service at Alma College and later at Cold Spring Harbor he taught at Eastern Illinois Normal School from 1907 to 1915. This excellent school was blessed with a president who was equally concerned with good teaching practice and sound subject matter instruction. He was also sympathetic with research. During this time Transeau was enabled to complete a seven-year study of algal periodicity and become a master of the field of algology.

He succeeded Dachnowski as professor of ecology and plant physiology at Ohio State in 1915, at a critical period of expansion for that institution. One of his first responsibilities was to act as host to the small but distinguished group who organized the Ecological Society of America at the AAAS meeting at Columbus during that year. Three years later he succeeded the late John H. Schaffner as department head, leaving the latter free to pursue work that he preferred to administration. Incidentally, Transeau was among the relatively few to understand the greatness of Schaffner's achievements, obscured by the latter's modesty and the small circulation of his papers published in the Ohio Journal of Science. In many respects Schaffner anticipated others who have enjoyed wider fame.

Coming to Ohio State at the height of his powers, Transeau brought a unique combination of talents. Equally appreciative of scholarship and good teaching, both as to manner and method, he broke down the shop-worn barriers between class and laboratory and effected a new synthesis of the various facets of botany. He dealt

effectively and in an original way with the problems of mass teaching. He also helped dispel the superstition that time given to guiding the basic adventure in science, i.e. laboratory work, is worth only half the time given to lecturing and recitation, however drowsy.

I recall during this period remarking to William Crocker that Transeau had in a short time developed one of the best departments of botany in the nation. Crocker's response was "Why do you say one of the best? It is top-notch."

Transeau eventually presented his synthesis of general botany in text form. The first of his books was a beautifully balanced, clearly written secondary school text, **SCIENCE OF PLANT LIFE**, followed in 1923 by his **GENERAL BOTANY**. In both works the ecology of the living plant serves as the central theme, instead of being dragged in as a perfunctory chapter somewhere along the line as it too often is.

Because he knew plants and plant behavior as well as vegetation, his concept of ecology was sound and symmetrical. He was an early student of such disparate matters as the historical factor in vegetation on the one hand, and the energetics of plant communities on the other. He followed developments in physical chemistry closely and urged upon his students the importance of mathematics.

I do not have at hand his complete bibliography. It is not lengthy by current standards. Like his former teacher, John M. Coulter, he believed that "a man is not heard for his much speaking" and was more interested in quality than mass production. His services to botany are attested by his presidency in 1940 of the Botanical Society of America.

As with all of us, Transeau had his share of disappointments. With his support, Adolph Waller had developed a small but superb botanical garden at Ohio State. This was ruthlessly destroyed to make way for new buildings. More tragic was the premature loss of his wife, a physician of great ability and intelligence. Happily he was able to spend his later years with his daughter Betty, Mrs. August C. Mahr, and her family.

Physically, Edgar Transeau was a handsome individual, in manner reserved and yet an excellent conversationalist. Skeptical but never cynical, he was capable of strong, quiet enthusiasm, while his firm character commanded both respect and loyalty from his associates and students. Certainly he was a man of wisdom and good judgment. I shall not forget his reply, when sometime around 1937 I asked him if he thought there would be a general war. His answer was, "Of course there will be. When men get guns to play with, they will soon begin to shoot each other."

Although I never had the privilege of sitting in his classes, I am immeasurably grateful for the few years I was his associate and the many that I was his friend.

Paul B. Sears,  
At the request of  
the Resolutions Committee,

R. B. Kelting, L. B. Slobodkin,  
F. W. Stearns and C. J. Goodnight, Chm.