

## FRANK FORTESCUE LAIDLAW (1876-1963)

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A short biography of F.F. LAIDLAW (Feb. 1, 1876 - Dec. 11, 1963) and a brief appreciation of his scientific work, are followed by his complete bibliography. Dr Laidlaw was one of the most prolific students of the taxonomy and systematics of the Oriental Odonata. The present paper is largely based on his unpublished correspondence. The account of the discovery of the Himalayan *Epiophlebia laidlawi* Till. is outlined in some detail.

### INTRODUCTION

Interested in nature from childhood, Dr Laidlaw trained firstly in zoology and was subsequently selected as zoologist to the Skeat Expedition to Malaya and neighbouring territories at the turn of the century. This year-long voyage provided several avenues of faunal research, the wide scope of which can be seen in the list here of his publications. The Malayan environment intrigued him and, moreover, stimulated an interest in dragonflies, in which, with terrestrial molluscs, he became recognized as the authority in that region.



Following a short lectureship on return from the East he turned to the study of medicine and later took up a practice in a Devonshire village. Spare time found him immersed in faunal research, chiefly Oriental; now and then investigating

alpine flora in Scotland.

His work was conducted with great care. However, it was overshadowed by a discovery on which he did not publish. He had the good fortune to find an unexpected larva of the archaic genus *Epiophlebia*, a chance capture in a miscellaneous collection submitted from a 1918 Himalayan expedition. Its identity could so easily have been shelved as one of indeterminate material because there had been no suspicion of the presence of an anisozygopteran in these mountains so far from Japan. Even the larva of the Japanese *Epiophlebia superstes* was scarcely known for several years after this. It was undoubtedly a brilliant and memorable highlight of Laidlaw's research.

A modest individual, who carried on his medical practice for over thirty years, he was revered by all for his friendly, unassuming cooperation in the life of the community.

### EARLY YEARS

Born at Galashiels in Scotland on the 1st February 1876, he spent most of his life thereafter in the south of England. His letters indicate that he never lost his affection for the land of his birth, sometimes intimating his delight in revisiting the highlands. In one such letter he described the Scottish highlands as "Certainly the most fascinating spot in Europe". And by this he did not only mean just his interest in the flora of Ben Lawers in Perthshire, which he so often visited between 1902 and 1912. There is the distinct feeling of satisfaction in being able to return to Scotland. There was also a hankering to revisit south-east Asia, but unfortunately, this he was unable to do.

His early childhood was spent in Guildford, in Surrey, but of this there is little to say. He seems to have tried a number of pursuits, but above all there was the love of anything in the realm of natural history, whether plant or animal life, and particularly insects and their ways. A daughter, Ruby Laidlaw, lent me a copy of a full-sized child's magazine that he had planned and assembled at the age of nine. It carried the date, November 1885, and was surprisingly full of information. There were short articles on natural history and zoological matters, and remarks on early coins. There were anecdotes, some poems and a few news items, a visit by Queen Victoria and an election. The scope and care taken so early on are perhaps an indication of developing individuality and initiative.

The countryside provided opportunities for exploration and investigation into wild life, stimulating his interest and paving the way in later years for more serious research if the enthusiasm continued into later life. This it did, of course, in full measure.

## TRAINING AND EXPEDITION TO MALAYA

He went to school at Uppingham and from there to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he proved an ardent student from 1895 to 1898, completing his studies brilliantly with a double-first in zoology, an excellent prelude to a possible career in the natural sciences.

From there he was fortunate in being able to join W. W. Skeat's Expedition to Malaya in 1899. At 23 this was, I feel sure, the most rewarding and exciting voyage of his life. It lasted over a year, giving adequate time for study and for the collection of material. It enabled him also to pay a short visit to Thailand, or Siam as it was then called. And subsequent research in later years was partly based on the material obtained on the Malayan voyage.

## INTEREST IN ODONATA

The Malayan Archipelago and its animal life fascinated him, with its attenuated shape and its great variety of fauna. He must already have been familiar enough with Mollusca, at least on broad lines. The Oriental Odonata, however, were so enthralling after the very restricted British species and many were so attractively coloured, that he collected as many as possible. It may have been at this juncture that he first became really interested in dragonflies. When he joined the expedition he had little knowledge of these insects and this made selection difficult. Years later when he had learnt how to identify specific Odonata and had, in fact, become an authority on this discipline he wrote sadly to Lieftinck on the 22nd of September 1929, "I wish I had been able to know something of dragonflies before I went out instead of having to learn everything on my return". Just two years earlier he had turned to Lieftinck as the specialist in the Odonata of East Indies, where the fauna would be related to that of Malaya.

## THE TILLYARD CORRESPONDENCE

Laidlaw's oldest entomological friend, however, a very close one indeed, was Robin J. Tillyard who had gone out to New South Wales and at the start of their acquaintance in October 1907 was teaching at Sydney Grammar School. Dr Eric Laidlaw, the son, kindly lent a stack of Tillyard letters and I must crave indulgence for diverging here to these since they are virtually a record of most of the wide range of research he, Tillyard, was carrying out for the rest of his life, ending in an isolated letter of 21st April 1936, a year before he died. Thus, Laidlaw had substantial advance information on the books and papers Tillyard was planning, the last being the unfinished reclassification of the Odonata, which Fraser completed between 1938 and 1940 under joint authorship. At the same time, Tillyard hoped for Laidlaw's criticism of his own writings and conclusions

since there was nobody out there who could do so.

At the start of this correspondence Tillyard was 26 years of age, three years the junior. Into the letters he seemed to pour out nearly all his prevailing thoughts of day, written with an enthusiasm which possibly excelled Laidlaw's own, on scientific aspects or sundry, even mundane remarks and family news, interspersed distressingly with waves of calamities, ailments, accidents or financial straits from which he suffered. Except for the scientific details the letters were informal, often happy, at times a little tragic, when illness restricted activities, or strain was occasioned by money problems or from a nearly catastrophic bush fire. Yet, despite personal troubles he usually achieved his aspirations in the end.

As an example of his enthusiasm, there is a letter of 15th March 1908 where, after an agonizing, slow and freezing stalk through cold water in a deep billabong he captured what he realized were two new species, the beautiful dark *Camicinia* which he promptly named *othello* and: "The other one (oh joy!) is *another* new *Petalura* . . ." (*pulcherrima*). Elsewhere, 4th April 1909, he says "Isn't *Macromia tillyardi* a fine chap!" and spontaneously uses similar terms of endearment to Laidlaw himself . . . "dear old chap!" The bonds of friendship were ever being tightened.

At times he criticizes, favourably or otherwise, the statements of other renowned odonatists of the day, and I must give one instance before returning to Laidlaw's activities. In a letter of 6th July 1913 he disagrees with René Martin and Friedrich Ris that a *Ceriagrion* in Queensland is the same as the African *C. glabrum* (Burmeister) and he is glad Laidlaw is in agreement with him. "If they were the same", wrote Tillyard, "surely the species should be a Gondwanaland remnant, but no Agrionid genus is old enough for that." If the Queensland one proves to be an unnamed species he would like to name it *C. laidlawi*.

## A LECTURER TURNS MEDICAL PRACTITIONER

Back in England from Malaya, Laidlaw was appointed Lecturer and Assistant Demonstrator in Zoology at Owen's College, Manchester, under Professor Hickson.

However, in 1903 he turned to the study of medicine and qualified with MRCS and LRCP to his name in 1909 at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. He found time there to assist a senior, honorary surgeon McAdam Eccles in a paper on problems of invagination of the bowel, in 1911. In that same year he took up medical practice at Uffculme in Devon and, except for a three-year period with the RAMC during the Second World War, he remained in that village until after retirement in 1945. Even after this he still took an occasional locum when his successor was away and it may be mentioned that Col. F.C. Fraser, himself a surgeon, helped Laidlaw with a locum on one occasion.

His interests in natural history had to be fitted in during lulls in the practice. At

times he would go up to the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, generally to see D.E. Kimmins, who helped him with some of his photography. Laidlaw somehow succeeded in publishing a great many papers during these years, particularly in his chosen fields of molluscs and dragonflies. Epidemics seem to have been the only crises that really held up his work. He had to admit that constant attention to the sick necessitated a pause at times before he could regroup his thoughts to problems of research or investigations into wild life in the pleasant Devon countryside.

### FAMILY AND VILLAGE LIFE

Soon after taking up his medical career, he married Maud Wright and they enjoyed a long life of happiness. They had a daughter Mary, followed by twins, Eric and Ruby. Like his father, Eric became a doctor and Ruby trained as a nurse, in 1936-39, at Bartholomew's Hospital. During the war Ruby was a health visitor in Surrey, whilst the father was in the RAMC. Laidlaw's expectations of ultimate victory in the War were clearly mirrored in his letters.

During all his time in Devon he played a full part in village life. He was the Vicar's warden for years and a licensed Lay Reader. In this capacity he regularly took Sunday Evening Service at an outlying church in the parish. In addition, he was on the Parish Council at Uffculme. On one occasion he organized a stage production of Julius Caesar, taking the part of Mark Anthony. He was also a Free mason.

Yet, in spite of all these activities he was no extrovert, but a modest and highly respected member of the community, much loved and admired for his ability and kindness. Despite his wide knowledge, perhaps without equal in the neighbourhood, he was devoid of anything in the nature of snobbishness. He could converse happily and pleasantly with people of all walks of life, like the best medical practitioners, never seeming to express dislike of anyone. With his humanity went a most equable temperament at all times. In other words, he was a good family doctor and a part-time scientist of merit. Alert and sensitive, imbued with a fine sense of humour and wit, he enjoyed good conversation.

A light-hearted moment in a letter of September 1929 on dragonflies illustrates his humour, I think, rather charmingly. Lieftinck was probably going on a visit to the south of the Celebes group of islands (now Sulawesi). "Don't go to Komodo Island" he said, "or if you do beware of the dragon!"

Although now an authority on molluscs and dragonflies he was ever willing to discuss identifications or other problems reasonably and to hear other views, like any good scientist. Lieftinck, in a letter to me in July 1982, explained all this rather well. "He had the rare gift of expressing his opinions and views about relationships more or less instinctively, but these were always based on his own observations." There were occasions, of course, when he did not have the time or

opportunity to verify his facts but he had "a marvellous and distinctly modest way of stimulating and assisting students with less experience".

### SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

As a scientific research worker Laidlaw's industry — in spare moments, it must be emphasized — was not only quite considerable but also remarkably diverse in its scope. Most of his published papers, including all those on Odonata, are concerned with the Oriental region. In print he only ventured twice into the study of European molluscs, one of these being species from Scotland early on in 1908, the other on the Swiss-Italian border in 1929. Just a few papers were located nearer Africa, two on flat worms in East Africa, a mollusc from the Mascarene islands and one other flat worm paper on Cape Verde Islands off the West coast. His one publication on British insects was on Neuroptera in 1924.

Now and then letters record his line of research at the time. In 1928 his thoughts on Gomphidae were outlined. He found them progressive, modern and adaptable. He outlined a possible group-scheme for the family and his paper on gomphidae of the Oriental region appeared in 1930. In 1939 his attention was directed to a synonymic list of the Odonata fauna of Malaya, but as far as I am aware he did not publish this. In the 1940s he was working on a survey of the Chlorocyphidae, published in 1950.

He referred at times to his other major research, the land Mollusca, hoping to obtain more snails from Asia for study, his particular interest being in the large genus *Amphidromus*. Over the years he had described new genera and species of molluscs from Malaya, Borneo and various islands and his lists of the Malayan molluscs appeared in 1928 and 1933. In a recent letter, in August 1982, Asahina regards him as a "fine pioneer on Bornean Odonata". He was equally a pioneer on both the Odonata and the Mollusca of Malaya.

One of the first papers he ever had in print was on the character of the Malay Peninsula, in 1901. Years later, in 1953, he wrote a personal narrative on some of his travels there. Between 1900 and 1902 he recorded amphibians and reptiles of the Malayan, Maldivian and Laccadive (now Lakshadweep) archipelagoes. He also reported on marine turbellarians (planarians) from Asia between 1902 and 1907. His discoveries included new species of deep-sea nemertines (thread-worms) of the genera *Bathynemertes* and *Dinonemertes* from the Indian Ocean, described in 1906.

The first molluscan paper was in 1908, the last in 1963, the year he died. A paper on Neuroptera-Planipennia, in southwestern England, in 1924, was primarily and necessarily on lacewings, not on the great ant-lions, prolific in warmer lands. The first of his dragonfly papers was in 1902, the final one in 1955.

In his more serious study of plant life Laidlaw concentrated on the flora of Ben Lawers, in Perthshire, which involved lugging a heavy plate camera up the

mountain to complete his investigations. As a result he was able to provide photographs of montane plants for A.G. Tansley's *Types of English Vegetation*, published in 1911, and of arctic and alpine species for a later work by the same author in 1939, *The British Isles and their vegetation*. It is also attributed to Laidlaw that he was the first to find Wintergreen, *Pyrola minor*, in Devon and, between 1951 and 1952, when in retirement, he rediscovered the helleborine orchid, *Epipactis vectensis* in the Isle of Wight. This led to its alteration in status and this name fell in synonymy to *E. phyllanthes*. In a letter of June 1963 to Asahina, he expressed his interest in alpine flora and orchids were also an occasional topic in correspondence.

### RETIREMENT AND CORRESPONDENCE

On his retirement in 1945, after thirty four years as a medical practitioner, the parishioners of Uffculme presented him with an illuminated address to show their deep appreciation of his constant help and advice over the years.

Lieftinck, who corresponded regularly with him from 1927 to 1963, said he was a close friend and "a most fascinating correspondent" right up to the day before his death. Asahina, whose correspondence with him lasted from 1954 to 1963, gave a similar opinion. Both kindly lent me the bundles of mail they had carefully preserved over the years and I was able to judge for myself. Although nearly all were on Odonata, and on the sober taxonomic aspect, it was obvious that Laidlaw really delighted in just writing to his friends on identifications, points of view, and a desire to hear what they had to say and the letters were generally full of zest. He was an "avid correspondent" as he expressly admitted in one letter. Items of quite general or topical interest were sometimes mentioned, or there might be remarks on terrestrial molluscs and the hope that someone would send more of these from eastern Asia for study. At times he found it hard to contain his impatience if replies were not coming fast enough. Research workers can sympathize here with both recipient and scribe.

Another aspect, a request frequently expressed, was his constant hope that these two great odonatists, separated from him by half the circumference of the globe, would find time to come and visit him in Devon during their next holidays in Europe. Lieftinck managed this before long, to their mutual pleasure. Asahina did so in 1953, when Dr and Mrs Laidlaw were staying in retirement with their son in the Isle of Wight, and it was from that moment that their correspondence blossomed.

A topic in other letters to Lieftinck was his delight in finding two of the more interesting Fritillary butterflies which occur in Britain, the very local Heath Fritillary, *Eurydryas aurinia* in one of its Devon haunts and, a few years afterwards, the Glanville Fritillary, *Melitaea cinxia* in its last English refuge, the Isle of Wight. It may be added that further encroachment of land development

has now endangered the existence of the Glanville Fritillary in Britain. Members of that island's Natural History and Archaeological Society, whose emblem is this butterfly, are well aware of this and I feel sure that Dr Frank Laidlaw, had he survived, would have been in the forefront of the exercise being currently undertaken to try saving this attractive species from the extinction of its last populations from these isles.

#### DISCOVERY OF THE HIMALAYAN *EPIOPHLEBIA*

Another highlight was the confirmation that Tillyard had been correct in 1921 in describing that astounding discovery of a single larva, fortuitously collected in the Himalayan range, and which had turned out to be another extant specimen of the anisozygopteran genus *Epiophlebia*, as a distinct species separate from the far-away populations of the Japanese *superstes* of Selys. Perhaps a brief history of the identification of *E. laidlawi* Tillyard might be of general interest and especially since Laidlaw himself had a major part in this.

The single gomphid-like larva had been collected by a Mr S. Kemp who was interested in recording the montane fauna. He took the specimen on an expedition in June 1918 from a rapidly flowing stream between Ghum and Sonada near Darjeeling at 7000 feet. It was despatched, with miscellaneous material, to Laidlaw who studied it carefully and came to the conclusion that this remarkable larva, in its penultimate instar, must be an *Epiophlebia*. The larva was photographed and in London he discussed the illustration with Herbert Campion at the British Museum (Natural History). They could not, however, come to a definite decision from the reproductions. Early in 1920 Laidlaw wrote to Robin Tillyard, enclosing a description of the larva. Tillyard replied on the 22nd of March, congratulating him on obtaining such a fine archaic larva, but at the same time doubting, from the description, if it could really be an *Epiophlebia*. Moreover, he wrote out what he believed the characters of a true *Epiophlebia* larva should look like.

Later, in June that same year, Tillyard was in England where he met Laidlaw and Campion at the British Museum. They re-examined the photographs but, again, could not be sure from these. In July he visited Laidlaw at his Devonshire home and studied the specimen and the slides prepared from it. Eric said his mother recalled that they all sat in speechless wonder gazing at the specimen for the whole evening. At last Tillyard pronounced himself satisfied that it was not only an *Epiophlebia* but also a new species. He urged Laidlaw to write a paper on it, but his friend in turn persuaded him to take it back to Australia with him, together with all the necessary slides and notes, and to prepare the description himself.

On the 17th January 1921, in a letter to Laidlaw, Tillyard enclosed a copy of his description based on Laidlaw's notes and his own examination, and he included a



copy of James Needham's figure of the venation of *E. superstes*. In the description he gave full credit to Laidlaw's original determination that it was an *Epiophlebia* and named the species *laidlawi* in recognition of this. "After thinking it over for some months", he declared in the letter. "there seemed to be in my mind no doubt whatever that your determination was correct" (that it was an *Epiophlebia*). "The only risky thing which I have done in the paper is the giving of a name to this larva" (*laidlawi*: he usually avoided giving new names to a single specimen). Shortly after this, the description was published in *Rec. Ind. Mus.* 22: 93-107 (1921). By February 1922, copies had reached most specialists and Tillyard wrote that month, saying "Fraser is keen and has one or two men on the lookout for the adult up in the mountains".

Robin Tillyard, with the tendency many of us have in aftermath to worry over published remarks or decisions, must have subsequently felt a nagging uncertainty about the distinction of the Himalayan larva from the Japanese *superstes* and he obviously communicated this feeling over the next few years to his Devonshire friend. Laidlaw decided that the only solution was to have a meeting and thrash out the problems. It was another dozen years, however, before such a meeting could be held with Tillyard. Part of the reason for the delay was obviously the infrequency of Tillyard's visits to England.

During the days of that eventual meeting in the late autumn of 1933 it seems, from letters to Lieftinck, that it was hard to convince Tillyard until Laidlaw managed to borrow a photograph of the larva of *superstes* from Lieftinck, and which was dispatched on 2nd October 1933. The latter recently told me the origin of this illustration. It had been photographed by a Japanese correspondent, T. Okumura, at Takao near Tokyo, and was probably the first paper to be published on the *superstes* larva. At the conference, this photograph apparently sufficed and Laidlaw was able to convince his friend that the original verdict had been correct. "I think it proves conclusively" Laidlaw wrote to Lieftinck, "that Tillyard was right in naming the Himalayan larva. The photo shows specific differences, but generally there can be no doubt". All were delighted at the outcome and, like the others, Lieftinck must have passed through an anxious period until it was settled. As is well known, of course, Asahina eventually redescribed the larva of *laidlawi* in 1958, and later confirmed the distinction from the larva of *superstes* in 1961.

Lieftinck recalled a comment by Laidlaw in August 1934 when Fraser was reported to be collecting *Epiophlebia superstes* in Japan. "Lucky man! but why didn't he collect them at Darjeeling?" But it was not so easy as Fraser had long before discovered. In fact, the adult of *laidlawi* still eluded its seekers for years afterwards until eventually captured, rather surprisingly, thirty years later, by a Japanese party of lepidopterists in East Nepal, who passed the material to Asahina for examination.

## CLOSING DAYS

In a poignant letter commenced on the 10th December 1963, full of reminiscences, Laidlaw told Lieftinck of this ultimate success. In fact, it was really fortunate that Laidlaw learnt of it in time. It was only a few hours later, shortly before dawn the next morning, that he passed peacefully away in his sleep, as his son Eric was able to relate when the unfinished letter was forwarded.

Right up to the very last his interest never flagged. I understand that he was working on new Bornean land snails.

Throughout nearly thirty seven years of warm and enthusiastic correspondence between these friends one small point may perhaps be singled out. Neither ventured to use christian names. I suspect that the natural reserve of the islander influenced the hesitation of the younger specialist. The attitude was, of course, much more formal in earlier days and any changes in these isles have largely developed since the last War.



After retirement Dr and Mrs Laidlaw went to stay with their son Eric in the Isle of Wight from 1947 to 1956. The last years were passed in the home of their daughter Mary Folkard who had married the rector of Foxearth, a village in Essex on the Suffolk border. Here they were able to live independently until Frank Laidlaw died. He is buried in the Foxearth Churchyard.

## SOCIETIES

Early in his career Laidlaw was elected a member of the Malacological Society of London, a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and a Fellow of the Entomological Society of London. For his services to Malayan natural history he was elected a corresponding member of the Malayan branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

## LIDLAW'S COLLECTIONS

Decease of a specialist in the biological sciences can sometimes affect other authorities in his field of research in different parts of the world, to a varying degree. In some cases threads of their own research may be disrupted to some extent and an obvious instance is in the survival of private collections, especially where material has been used for the descriptions of type specimens or series. In Laidlaw's case his personal collections, as far as I have discovered, have suffered comparatively little on the whole. Portions certainly were lost in one way or another and admittedly I have not attempted to trace type material. Substantial numbers of the Odonata were purchased by the late John Cowley and these are now safely in the British Museum (Natural History). Lieftinck obtained duplicates direct from Laidlaw. And I understand that some of the molluscs were sold to Chicago Natural History Museum.

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*Portrait on p. 315 dated between 1910-1914. Photograph on p. 324 dated about 1935.*