

**In Memoriam  
John Rhys Williams  
(1925 – 2017)**



John Rhys Williams was born in Wales in 1925. He was educated at Pentre Secondary School from 1936 to 1942 after which he was admitted to the University of Bristol and graduated with a BSc first class honours in 1945. This allowed him to proceed for postgraduate studies at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of Science, University of London. His other academic qualifications were a MSc and a PhD awarded in 1957 and 1972, respectively, by the University of Bristol.

In 1947 he was recruited as an entomologist by the British Colonial Agricultural Service and was posted to the Mauritius Department of Agriculture where he spent 10 years. Among his achievements there was the biological control of the introduced weed *Cordia macrostachya* (l'herbe condé, black sage). In 1957 he joined the

Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI) which had been created four years earlier. He was appointed Head of the Entomology Division until 1978 when he was promoted to Principal Scientific Officer, then Assistant Director in 1980 and Deputy Director in 1984. He retired in 1985 but continued to serve the MSIRI as a consultant and later on a voluntary basis. He left the MSIRI on 30 June 2007 after serving the Institute for 50 years.

His main research activities focused on nematodes associated with sugar cane, the biology of Hemiptera and Lepidoptera attacking sugar cane, parasites of insects and biological control of sugar cane pests. He was also interested in the insect fauna of the Mascarenes, assembling a collection of some 8 000 specimens representing about 500 identified species - many unidentified species were kept pending further study. His research was published in prestigious scientific journals for entomology, nematology and agriculture. His activities covered also crops associated with sugar cane in Mauritius, such as potato, tomato, maize, ground nut and other species for which mandate for research had been entrusted to the MSIRI.

On the basis of the quality and originality of his research work, he was awarded the prestigious Doctor of Science (DSc) degree by the University of Bristol in 1979.

Dr Williams was the Editor and contributor of various chapters of the book 'Pests of Sugar Cane' published by Elsevier, Amsterdam in 1969. The book being still considered as the major reference for sugar cane entomology. He was the Editor of the XI Congress of the International Society of Sugar Cane Technologists (ISSCT) held in Mauritius in 1962. He published many papers at ISSCT Congresses in 1962, 1971, 1980 and 2013. He was the Chair for many years of the ISSCT Standing Committee of Entomologists and Chairman of the ISSCT Entomology Section for the XVIII Congress in Cuba in 1983.

Dr Williams lectured at the then Mauritius Agricultural College, forerunner of the University of Mauritius, and he was a member of the Senate of the University from 1980 to 1984. He was the external examiner for several doctorate theses for foreign universities. He visited many sugar-producing countries acting as a consultant to research institutions as well as sugar cane companies. Many of his foreign trips were devoted to the collection of beneficial insects for Mauritius.

In 1976-1977 the Mauritian sugar cane industry was severely affected by the soft scale insect, *Pulvinaria iceryi*. It was the most damaging pest infestation for decades and widespread infestations had only been recorded in 1862-1864. Little was known about it, especially by the canegrowers. The degree of infestation was so

severe and widespread and the damage to sugar cane fields considerable that some growers wanted to resort to large-scale insecticide treatments to control the pest. The MSIRI with John Williams as Chief Entomologist and Robert Antoine as Director opposed this approach and emphasised the importance of biological control. Dr Williams identified five species of primary hymenopterous parasites, four species of secondary hymenopterous parasites or hyperparasites, and eight species of predators of the soft scale. As the infestation became more and more severe and the damage more and more significant, so grew the population of the parasites and predators to the point that, as predicted by Dr Williams, the pest was brought under control - by early 1978 it was practically absent from the island. The MSIRI had been under considerable pressure from those promoting insecticide treatment but held firm on its stand concerning biological control and it was proved right. When Dr Williams retired in 1985, the Director of MSIRI praised him for the cool-headed way he had tackled the pulvinaria problem stating that he chose to swim against the current in the middle of the storm although it was easier and without personal risks to give way. This sentence summarises the man who John Williams was.

In 1950 he married Alix Chevreau de Montléhu and they had two daughters Eileen and Katherine. Among his various hobbies were

golf, dance, walking, foreign trips, classical music, cinema and bridge. He was passionate about history, especially that of the Second World War. He was also interested in the history of Wales, in the origin of life, in science fiction and, towards the end of his life, in sudoku.

Dr Williams passed away peaceful on 30 September 2017 at the age of 92.

On behalf of the ISSCT Executive Committee and Council, the Secretariat conveyed expressions of sympathy to Eileen and Katherine and their families.

A tribute to Dr. Williams published on 3 December 2017 in the weekly Weekend in Mauritius may be accessed at:

<http://www.lemauricien.com/article/hommage-dr-john-rhys-williams-1925-2017-celui-qui-sauva-lindustrie-sucriere-du-desastre>

Jean Claude Autrey