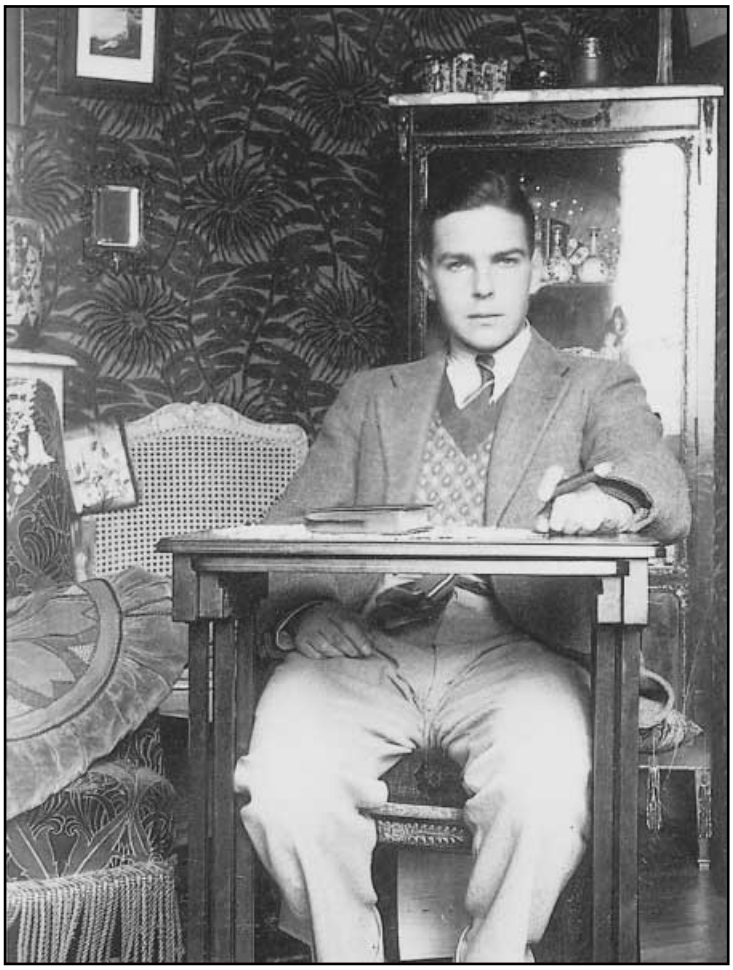
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OBITUARY

Nicholas Polunin: a scientist in the round



Professor Dr Nicholas Polunin, as he liked to be styled in the continental fashion, died aged 88 in Geneva, 8 December 1997. He was a distinguished scientist in many more fields than his first speciality of botany. He explored the Canadian Arctic and Greenland and discovered the last major islands to be added to the world map. He also spent his last twenty years in spirited support of the environmental cause, demonstrating the same elegant elan he brought to his academic endeavours.

For all that he became an environmentalist who prided himself on being abreast of the latest advances in analysis and evaluation, he retained certain traits of the old school. It was this traditionalist side that, in the view of many colleagues, bespoke the core Polunin: he was always his own person. For instance, he could not abide the use of 'billion' in its American sense, and writers in his journals were obliged to speak of billion only when they meant one million million, otherwise they had to stick with 1000 million.

Still more illuminatingly, he eschewed the use of 'ecosystem' when speaking of the planetary biosphere and its physical underpinnings. He insisted that an ecosystem should have specific boundaries, as in the case of a forest or an island or a puddle. How, he would ask, laughing at the absurdity of the notion, could Australia's ecosystem extend across the seas to be part of a global entity? Not all his peers would agree with him, but he persisted with his views in disregard for whatever 'fashionable science' might prefer. It was a characteristic that bothered some and endeared him to many.

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In these and other significant respects, Polunin was occasionally out of step with his times, and he minded not a jot. His dissident views reflected a passion for that prized scientific virtue, rigour, which implies a strictly disciplined approach to the scientific enterprise. Polunin displayed rigour in all his professional activities: precision and accuracy were all. He was sometimes puzzled when his colleagues did not display a parallel passion. And he extended this passion to another of his great loves, the English language. It was a delight to watch him savour a phrase, or to test a sentence as if tasting it.

Nicholas Polunin was born in Checkendon, Oxfordshire, the son of a Russian father and an English mother. In 1932 he graduated from Christ Church, Oxford, with a first in Botany and Ecology (an innovative combination in those days). He went on to a Master's at both Yale and Oxford, before finishing up with a DPhil and a DSc at Oxford. He then spent some time as a research associate at Harvard. Along the way, he pursued research on Arctic and sub-Arctic flora, travelling widely in Spitsbergen (which he crossed alone), Lapland, Iceland, Greenland, Labrador, Hudson Bay, Akpatok and Baffin Island, leaving plant collections in the Canada Museum, the Harvard Herbarium, the British Museum, and the Fielding Museum at Oxford. From 1932 to 1947, he was botanical lecturer and tutor in several Oxford colleges, especially New College, and for five years from 1947 he was Professor of Botany at McGill University in Montreal.

Thereafter Polunin expanded his professional purview by heading for the tropics. In the late 1950s he participated in the establishment of the University of Baghdad, and in the early 1960s he performed a similar function with the University of Ife, Nigeria, where he actually planned the new campus, as well as serving as head of the science faculty. In later life he held academic appointments on four continents.

Among his notable scientific achievements was the discovery in 1936 of plants in south-western Greenland introduced by the Vikings. Still more remarkably, in 1946 Polunin the explorer discovered two islands located in the Foxe Basin to the west of Baffin Island and subsequently named Prince Charles Island and Air Force Island. Even more exceptional was his demonstration of the summertime existence of microbial spores and pollen grains high above the North Pole. He also tracked down several new species of Arctic plants.

Although he retained his British nationality, he moved to Switzerland in 1959 by invitation, and from his Geneva base embarked on what many consider were the prime accomplishments of a highly diverse career. From the start he had espoused the cause of holistic science - an exceptionally pioneering departure in the 1930s, since even today it is viewed askance by many in the citadels of single-discipline science.

This expansive approach led Polunin to be one of the first scientists to ask whether our environments, and especially wildlife habitats, were threatened by the rise in human numbers and human demands. A conservationist by personal inclination as well as by professional calling, he became the founding editor of the journal *Biological Conservation* in 1967, until he moved on in 1974 to play a similar role in an even more prestigious journal, *Environmental Conservation*, which now enjoys circulation and acclaim in dozens of countries.

At the same stage in his still productive life (he was then in his mid-sixties), he established the Foundation for Environmental Conservation, under whose auspices he organized four international conferences in Helsinki, Reykjavik, Edinburgh and Budapest. Each of these conferences led to first-rate books reviewing environmental prospects and highlighting both the problems and opportunities implicit therein. Notable among these books were *Maintenance of the Biosphere* (1990) and *Surviving with the Biosphere* (1993). A final fine book was *Population and Global Security* (1994), revised in his last year.

Polunin's efforts were recognized through numerous awards: the US Order of Polaris (twice), the Ramdeo Medal of India, the Marie-Victorin Medal of Canada, the Sasakawa Environmental Prize of the United Nations, the President Quo Mo-Jo Medal of China, the Vernadsky Medal of the Soviet Union, the Zechenyi medal of Hungary, the Order of the Golden Ark of the World Wildlife Fund, Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and the Global 500 Roll of Honour of the UN Environmental Programme. In addition, several geological features in the Canadian Eastern Arctic were named after him, as were a number of Canadian Arctic and Greenlandic plants.

His work is well summarized by a recreation (sic) item listed in his entry in *Who's Who*: 'working towards establishing a planetary eco-network of environmental conservational watchdogs'. The same entry mentions that he was 'embarrassed by personal publicity but welcomes news media support provided it is accurate and dignified'. This was Polunin exactly. He crusaded for

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the environment with a rigour and vigour that placed him among the most worthy, and he was already in the van when most of today's crusaders were still in school. At the same time, he brought to the cause a courtly spirit that often set him apart. I especially appreciated him for his gentlemanly demeanour, however frantic the fray, and whatever the different deportment of those around him. Of all crusaders, he was a verray parfit gentil knight.

He married first, in 1939 (dissolved in 1947) Helen Lovat Fraser, who died in 1973; they had a son. He married secondly, in 1948, Helen Eugenie Campbell; they had two sons and a daughter.

NORMAN MYERS
Advisory Editor
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