

Willis Linn Jepson

1867–1946

Willis Linn Jepson, dean of California botanists, died at his home in Berkeley on November 7, 1946, after a protracted illness, at the age of 79. He devoted a fruitful half century of zealous investigation to the systematic botany of his native state. His *Flora of Western Middle California* (1901), *Silva of California* (1910), *Manual of the flowering plants of California* (1923–25), and the monographic (uncompleted) *Flora of California* (1909–43) have firmly established him not only as the principal interpreter of the California flora but also as one of the greatest of American regional botanists. "Jepson's Manual" has been for more than 20 years the well-worn threshold for thousands of students to an understanding and appreciation of the remarkably diversified vegetation of the state.

Jepson was born of Scotch-English stock on August 19, 1867, at Little Oak, near Vacaville, in the rolling foothills at the edge of the Great Valley. He was graduated from the University of California in 1889. The following year he became an assistant in botany and devoted his attention principally to systematic botany under the direction E. L. Greene, pioneer taxonomist and founder of the Department of Botany. From 1895 to 1898 Jepson served as instructor, undertaking research with Greene, M. A. Howe, Setchell, and J. C. Merriam at Berkeley, G. F. Atkinson and W. W. Rowlee at Cornell (1895), and B. L. Robinson at Harvard (1896–97). He was awarded the Ph.D. at the University of California in 1899, with a major in systematic botany and minors in plant physiology and paleophytology. In 1905 he studied the classical herbaria at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and in 1906 those at Berlin. He was made assistant professor in 1899, associate professor in 1911, professor in 1918, and professor emeritus in 1937. Thus, his entire life was identified with the University, and his work devoted almost exclusively to the plants of California.

His botanical reputation must rest primarily on the ambitious *Flora of California*, which he regarded as his major contribution. This is perhaps the outstanding work on regional flora thus far produced in this country. It owes its great merit to the wealth of field observation, ecological and geographical data, profuse illustration, and careful documentation of observations and ranges by citation of specimens, as well as to the eminently sane taxonomic judgment. Although he was a student and admirer of Greene and incorporated much of that author's brilliant but frequently erratic work, Jepson's taxonomic concept was essentially conservative and in the tradition of Bentham, Hooker, Torrey, and Gray. Because of its general usability, his manual has long enjoyed a popularity in the West comparable only to that of "Gray's Manual" in eastern North America. Jepson's voluminous

publications will necessarily serve as the basis for all future work on the rich California flora.

The editorship of *Erythea* was turned over to him by Greene, and he served in that capacity from 1893 to 1900. Jepson founded the California Botanical Society in 1915 as well as its journal, *Madroño*, which he edited until 1933. In these two journals appeared most of his shorter papers, dealing with botanical exploration and biography, geographical distribution, taxonomy, and teratology. His field work covered most of the state, and he was particularly fond of the less known deserts, mountains, and valleys, where he reveled in the role of pioneer explorer. In 1899 he made a botanical expedition to Alaska, and in 1926 to Syria and Palestine, but the bulk of his field study was confined to California. He was an enthusiastic conservationist and served as a councilor of the Save the Redwoods League and of the Point Lobos Association. Although he will be classified as an "orthodox" taxonomist, he was an ardent evolutionist and more hospitable than many of his contemporaries to the cytogenetic and experimental approaches of "biosystematics."

Many honors came to him during his long, productive lifetime. His colleagues honored him with the Faculty Research Lectureship in 1934, and his University with the LL.D. in 1941. He was president of the California Botanical Society, 1913–15 and 1918–29; fellow of the California Academy of Sciences, American Academy of Arts and Science (Boston), Royal Society of Arts (London), and American Geographical Society; delegate to the International Agricultural Congress at Liège (1906) and the International Botanical Congresses at Cambridge (1930) and Amsterdam (1935); foreign member of the Société Linnéenne de Lyon and the National Botanical Society of Czechoslovakia; councilor of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden; life member of the American Genetic Association; and member of the American Society of Plant Taxonomists, Botanical Society of America, Society of Foresters, Washington Academy of Sciences, Western Society of Naturalists, Phi Beta Kappa, and Sigma Xi.

His memory is perpetuated by the saxifragaceous genus, *Jepsonia*, dedicated to him by J. K. Small, and by a host of commemorative specific epithets. But these tokens are insignificant in comparison with the tremendous debt owed him by every student of Californian natural history. He was remarkably successful both as teacher and writer in communicating his great enthusiasm for the flora which he had done so much to make understandable. Perhaps he would prefer to be remembered, in the words of his memorial to Parish, "as one who cared for and gave his life without stint to botanical science, as one who believed in the science absolutely, as he conceived it."

LINCOLN CONSTANCE
University of California, Berkeley