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Whitelegge, Thomas (1850-1927)

Posted on March 27, 2012 by Chris

Thomas Whitelegge was what some have termed a "*working man naturalist*" or "*artisan naturalist*" – that is to say, he had relatively little in the way of formal education but nevertheless, through interest and application, became a respected botanist and zoologist.

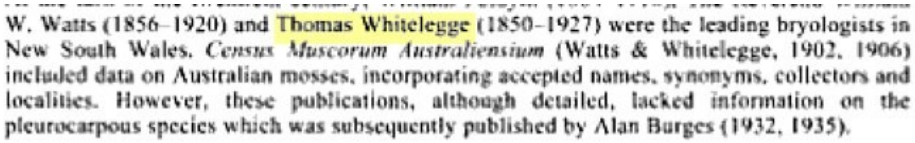
He was born in Stockport, the son of a brickmaker (*?*) on the 7th August, 1850. He left school at age 8, and worked in a factory before being apprenticed to a hatter (see details on the blog of Manchester Museum). However, he did not complete his apprenticeship but went to work on a farm in Lancashire; it was whilst working here that his interest in natural history developed.

He joined the *Ashton-under-Lyne Linnean Botanical Society* and began the study of botany. He had a good knowledge of natural history and his detailed knowledge of microscopic pond life was soon recognized by others. He was later to help establish the Ashton Biological Society .

He married Ellen Steele in 1880. The 1881 census records that he was living at Russell Street, Ashton-under-Lyne and described him as a felt hatter. He was living with his "in-laws"; that is, in *Aaron (a blacksmith) and Eliza Steele's household*; with his wife, Ellen (described as a hearth rug maker), his daughter Annie (3 months) and widowed mother, Elizabeth Beeston. After the death of his mother, he and his wife (with their young family) migrated to Australia in 1883.

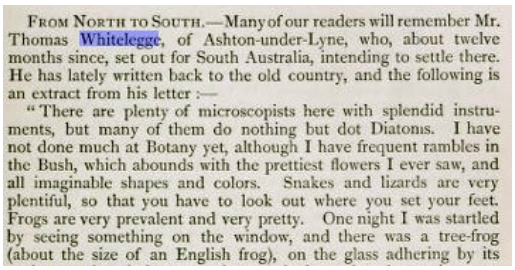
At first, he earned a living through plastering, and working in a brewery. However, his talents were soon recognised. He met (*Rev) Julian Tenison-Woods,* president of the Linnean Society of New South Wales and was proposed for membership by (Sir) William Macleay.

Whitelegge attended the society's weekly gatherings at Macleay's house at Elizabeth Bay. He also joined the Royal Society of New South Wales. Whitelegge was an authority on ferns and mosses.


W. Watts (1856–1920) and Thomas Whitelegge (1850–1927) were the leading bryologists in New South Wales. *Census Muscorum Australiensium* (Watts & Whitelegge, 1902, 1906) included data on Australian mosses, incorporating accepted names, synonyms, collectors and localities. However, these publications, although detailed, lacked information on the pleurocarpous species which was subsequently published by Alan Burges (1932, 1935).

Details of his contribution to bryology may be found here and further aspects of his life and career in Australia are detailed here.

He maintained contact with the UK as is evidenced by this snippet from ***The Microscopical News and Northern Microscopist*** :


FROM NORTH TO SOUTH.—Many of our readers will remember Mr. Thomas Whitelegge, of Ashton-under-Lyne, who, about twelve months since, set out for South Australia, intending to settle there. He has lately written back to the old country, and the following is an extract from his letter :—

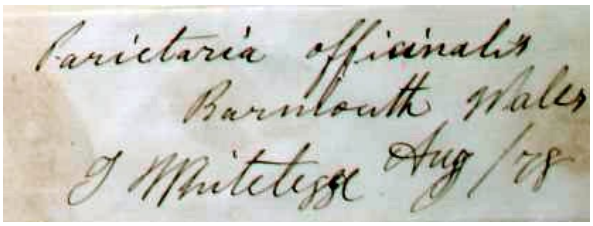
"There are plenty of microscopists here with splendid instruments, but many of them do nothing but dot Diatoms. I have not done much at Botany yet, although I have frequent rambles in the Bush, which abounds with the prettiest flowers I ever saw, and all imaginable shapes and colors. Snakes and lizards are very plentiful, so that you have to look out where you set your feet. Frogs are very prevalent and very pretty. One night I was startled by seeing something on the window, and there was a tree-frog (about the size of an English frog), on the glass adhering by its

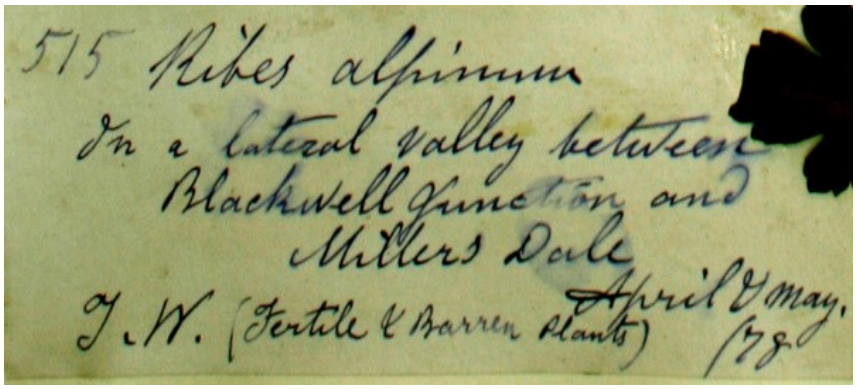
suckers to the window-pane, it moved about the glass quite comfortably for about half an hour, much to our amusement while we had our tea. I live in a nice locality for a Naturalist, some eight or ten square miles of bogs, swamps, and pools within a few minutes walk, or if I require the sea-side, I am about three miles from it. I can see Botany Bay from where I live, and can go by train for 6d., about eight miles.

"I have made the acquaintance of most of the scientists here, and am a F.L.S. and F.R.S., of N. S. W., Sydney. The Rev. J. E. Tenyson Woods gave me about 12 volumes of books, all bearing on Australian Natural History. He is a very great authority in all branches of Natural Science, well-known throughout Australia, having travelled nearly all over it. I have had several outings with him in search of infusoria. I have had good luck with my pond life studies here, having found a great many things not hitherto found in the colony. Two species of Polyzoa, *Plumatella repens* and *Fredericella sultana*, of Rotefera. I have added about six species to those already recorded; and have found four species new to science, I believe,—two species of Fresh Water Sponge, one hitherto only found in Queensland, and the other a new species, besides a lot of other microscopic things, which have not been observed here before."

He was one of Darwin's correspondents (on gynodioecism in Ranunculus) – see http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/. Thomas Whitelegge died on 4 August 1927 in Sydney.

Sheets / herbarium specimens associated with Thomas Whitelegge may be found on the herbaria@home website – follow this link





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At the opening of the twentieth century Thomas Whitelegge was walking near Sydney's beaches when he discovered small, regularly shaped artefacts of stone in wind-blown erosion areas. These were flakes of stone with a long sharp edge opposite a blunted edge, creating objects like a penknife blade (Figure 8.1). Whitelegge went to Robert Etheridge, then Curator at the Australian Museum, who inspected the localities and identified ancient workshops for manufacturing the tiny, neatly shaped stone implements. In 1907 Etheridge and Whitelegge published a description of these artefacts and concluded they had been surgical knives, scalpels, because of their sharp edges and small size. Etheridge realized these artefacts had never been used by Aborigines during the historical period; they were evidence of a time when people used different tools and led a different lifestyle. Now called 'backed artefacts' by archaeologists, these tools are found on archae-

With thanks to ***archive.org*** for the various snippets / images above

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