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## Dr Gustavus Adolphus Ornano St Brody

Gustavus Adolphus Ornano St Brody is a somewhat larger-than-life character whose legacy to British botany is somewhat equivocal. He undoubtedly made some significant discoveries but there is frequently a tinge of doubt remaining over their veracity and his methods. He does not always seem to have made the clear distinction between what was there and what should be there – with a suspicion that his voucher specimens were sometimes “illustrative”. He is also quoted by Allen (1987) as being a believer in the, now bizarre, notion that it could be relied upon that the “spirit of the place” (environment?) would preserve a species despite any deprivations made by his zealous collecting. An Obituary in the 1902 Journal of Botany demonstrates that although he was considered to be a botanist worthy of note, that little was really known about him and many of his records were suspect. A brief biography, mostly relating to his Gloucestershire collecting, is given by Riddelsdell et al. in their 1948 flora of that county. This again is somewhat circumspect ending with a note of caution.

He is generally believed to have been born in France in 1828, although his place of birth is given as Prussia in the 1861 census, and his marriage records are consistent in asserting that his father was Edward St Brody, a military officer. He seems to have arrived in England in the early 1850s, claiming a bachelor’s degree from Paris plus a master’s and doctorate from Gottingen. He is known to be here in September of 1854 when the Wells Journal reports on a lecture that he gave at the Town Hall, Weston-super-mare. In view of his age, he must have settled in England shortly after completing his studies, possibly being employed by one of the Weston-super-Mare schools, such as that of Jonathon Elwell, perhaps as a language tutor. It was during this time (1856) that he published his “Flora of Weston-super-Mare”, a volume which achieved some notoriety for its inaccuracies. A flora of Somersetshire was also advertised but this never materialized. He appears to have remained in Weston-super-mare until the autumn of 1860 when he is reported to have participated in a meeting in September.

On 10 November 1860 he gave the opening discourse on “British Mosses”, the first of a series of educational lectures on natural history, given at the Literary Institution, Cheltenham. It appears to have been well attended, chiefly by ladies. In early April of 1861 he was lodging at Wellington House, Wellington Street, Cheltenham and was described as a private tutor. He was still living here when he advertised his skills in botany, conchology, mineralogy and geology in the *Cheltenham Looker-On* in November.

Business as a private tutor must have been reasonably brisk as on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1862 he was able to marry Ann Rose Dudfield at St Paul’s parish church, Deptford. Ann was the third child and eldest daughter of the Gloucester veterinary surgeon Samuel Dudfield. The census returns of the previous year show that Rose had been residing with Juliet Coventry, the “principle of an educational establishment”, and that her occupation was given as vocalist. It is not clear why they married in London but it may be that Rose was based there with her brother, the celebrated Thomas Orme Dudfield MD (1833 - 1908) and his wife Lydia; she had been a witness at their Marylebone wedding two years earlier. The couple later lived in Kensington. Another factor could be the recent loss of Rose’s older brother Frederick Bird Dudfield, a custom’s officer in Shanghai,

who had died on 13 May of that year, although news of this may not have reached England as the official newspaper announcement was not made until July.

The birth of the couple's first child, Gustavus Lionel Ornano St Brody, was registered in the second quarter of 1863, although he was not baptized until 24<sup>th</sup> January the next year at St Nicholas, Gloucester. By this time the embryonic St Brody family was living at 37 Westgate, Gloucester – his in-laws were living at 44. It was in the November of 1863 that Dr St Brody was elected to fellowship of the Linnean Society. An announcement in the *Cheltenham Looker-On* in September of 1864 proclaimed that Mrs St Brody was resuming her musical career and was available to perform vocally and on the pianoforte and concertina.

By now St Brody was making a systematic study of the Gloucestershire flora, a project which came to fruition in 1864 with his entry for the Royal Horticultural Society's botanical competition. A great deal of controversy had surrounded the instigation of this competition, particularly with respect to the dangers of reckless collecting (Middleton 2014). The rules which had originally required a comprehensive set of the county's plants to be submitted were revised to ensure that each entry consisted of no more than 200 of its more characteristic plants – rarities were specifically excluded. When the entries were judged in 1865 he was awarded a silver medal for the best Gloucestershire entry and one of the three gold medals for the best overall collections. Much of this collection now resides in the Gloucester museum and from this it is clear that he seriously flouted the spirit of the competition. Although he may only have submitted 200 sheets for judging this was only a subset of what he actually collected. In similar letters submitted to the *Cheltenham Chronicle* and *Gloucester Journal* in April of 1865 he brags of his success in the competition and claims that his collection contained 811 plants of 652 species and 85 varieties. The letters are flagrant self publicity, presumably to advertise his services as a private tutor. This clearly rankled with Edward Davies, one of the two Gloucestershire runners-up in the competition, who wrote to the *Gloucester Journal* pointing out that he had adhered strictly to the rules of the competition with respect to both the number and type of plant which should be collected. His final sentence seems to have struck home – "*I am not writing this letter through disappointment, - such talent being arrayed against a self-taught man, no other result could be expected.*"

Rather strangely St Brody then entered into a public argument with the other bronze medal winner for Gloucestershire. In July 1865 the *Gloucester Journal* carried a news item that George Samuel Wintle had found *Silene dichotoma* growing near Painswick. St Brody took exception to the fact that it was described as "*a new addition to the flora of Gloucestershire*" and wrote a stinging response. His over-reaction was not based on any doubt of the plant's identity but merely on the semantics – regarding it as a casual alien. Wintle's reply was cautious but ended with an offer to make corrections to St Brody's proposed flora of Gloucestershire, when it was published, through the medium of the press. This was not received well and St Brody's response was extremely insulting, casting doubts on Wintle's (and also Davies') botanical credentials (which were good) – "*It is both instructive and amusing to read the arguments of men concerning a subject, of which they prove by their own statements, to possess but a superficial knowledge ...*". One can't help but feel that this rather arrogant correspondence gives an insight into the doctor's temperament.

By this time we know that St Brody was living at Norfolk Terrace, Gloucester and he was the French master at the Crypt Grammar School. The following year, on 3 March 1866 his wife gave birth to a daughter, Pauline Florence Laura St Brody, who was to inherit her mother's considerable musical talent. In April of this year he published a list of "*New Gloucestershire Plants*" in the *Journal of Botany*. He prefixed the list with a note that none of the plants had been included on Watson's list for the south Severn province. A reader sent a note to the editor pointing out that Watson's list excluded introduced species and that all of the truly British plants listed were actually on Watson's list. One cannot help but wonder whether the "*valued correspondent*" was G S Wintle. He continued through March, April and May of 1866 as a disgruntled correspondent to the *Gloucester Journal* in a debate over the "Antiquity of Man" – upsetting various people in the process.

In July of 1870 he announced in the Gloucestershire Chronicle that he was about to publish a county flora – this does not seem to have materialized. It was during 1870 that he sold his collection of Gloucestershire plants to the Gloucester museum, although the reason why is not

clear. In August of 1870 he advertised in the *Cheltenham Looker-On* for three or four children, from seven to ten years old, to be educated with his own. For 75 guineas per annum they would receive the benefits of his own attention and those of a talented governess; "... vacations correspond to those of Eton." The address given for prospective clients shows that he was now residing at Eastnor Villa, Gloucester. His wife Rose died on the last day of 1870, leaving him a widower at Eastnor Villa for the 1871 census. In the census return he is described as a German born naturalized British subject and Professor of Natural History and Foreign Literature, Author. This may indicate that he was no longer a teacher of French at the Crypt Grammar School; he was, however, affluent enough to employ a young general servant.

In 1872 he relinquished his fellowship of the Linnean Society and by 1874 was residing at Clarendon Street in Leamington Spa. During the spring months of 1874 he advertised his services as a tutor, giving a series of Saturday afternoon lectures in the physical sciences, limited to young ladies, including botany, geology, acoustics, light and heat. In May he also advertised lessons in modern languages as well as the natural and physical sciences. From the end 1874 until December 1877 he is consistently mentioned in newspaper advertisements for Leamington Spa College as their foreign language master.

Until now he had lived entirely in the south west of England but at the beginning of 1877 he moved to Richmond, Yorkshire. The time of this move can be established quite precisely as for the first three days of February 1977 a notice appeared in the *London Standard* advertising for a general servant – French or German, age about 20 – for light duties at Rose Cottage, Richmond. There are at least three known specimens catalogued by the Herbaria at Home project, all collected near Richmond by the Doctor in 1877 - *Campanula latifolia* (**MANCH**), *Myrrhis odorata* (**SLBI**) and *Galium parisiense* var. *anglicum* (**BIRM**).

In 1880 his home life became more complex. On 21 December, at the age of 43, he was married to Mary Lever at St Cuthbert's Church Lytham, Lancashire. His new wife, just 22 years old, was the daughter of Thomas Lever, a retired business man who had been engaged in the cotton trade. There can be no doubt of St Brody's identity as he gives his full name, that of his father, Edward Ornano St Brody - officer, and his own occupation – Professor of Science (a slight exaggeration). This would not be considered exceptional where it not for the fact that in the early April census returns of 1881 Dr St Brody is found living at Back Flags, Richmond, along with his two children but describing his marital status as "widower". This may be thought to indicate some great tragedy but it does not appear to be the case. In subsequent censuses his wife Mary gives her birthplace as Bolton and a compatible (if sometimes a little optimistic) age. The deception seems to relate to the birth of Pedro D'Alba St Brody whose birth was registered in Birkenhead in the first quarter of 1881. There can be little doubt that this is the couple's child despite the fact that in early April of 1881 he was living, as a visitor, with Alfred and Ellen Probert in Little Bolton and his age is given as "under 3 months". In a small town like Richmond it would have been noticed, and considered improper, for a respected school master to produce a son after such a short period of marriage and this seems to be a deliberate case of deception. Although no direct evidence has been found it is thought that St Brody was, or had been, an assistant master at the Ripon Grammar School – a respected establishment under the headmastership of Rev James Snowdon M.A. and run on strict religious principles. From this point onwards he became French and does not ever seem to have hinted at Prussian or German roots again.

How he met Mary is open to speculation; it is unlikely, though possible, that she had taken the post as his servant (she was the right age) or she may have been employed locally. It cannot be coincidence Mary is later described as a music teacher and that Flora St Brody, now 14 years old, was to follow a career as a music teacher herself. His 17 year old son Lionel was described as an artist, painter. He had shown a precocious talent for water-colour painting and had given exhibitions of his work while still a schoolboy in Leamington. The family does not have a servant at this time.

Their domestic arrangements were soon to be normalised and in August of 1882 Mrs St Brody advertised, in the *Western Gazette*, for a general servant – "must be clean and willing" – to perform light housework. The address given is Batcombe, Evercreech, Bath. This is certainly a move back to more familiar territory for the doctor and, although there is not as yet any evidence, he may have taken a post at the Rev Walter C Bates' school in this small village, which

specialized in preparing young men for entry to Sandhurst. Advertisements for this establishment made in 1888 claim that it had five "experienced" tutors.

His son Lionel died in early 1883 at the early age of 19, his death was registered in Bath. The family seem to have remained in the general area and in 1865 there are reports of Florence St Brody passing Royal Academy of Music examinations in pianoforte and elements of music. The following year she passed further examinations in Bristol, having studied with Mrs Kinchin there. By 1886 St Brody appears to have moved to the London area and the death of his (clandestine) son Pedro D'Alba is recorded in Hampstead in 1886 followed by the birth of a daughter Winifred Gladys St Brody, registered in Lambeth in 1887. During 1886 and 1887 there are newspaper items showing that Florence was at Worcester Ladies' College and was passing further music examinations there. There is a curious report of a college concert at Christmas 1886 when a performance was given by the "Misses St Brody." It is tempting suggest that the other Miss St Brody was Mary, Florence's step-mother. Such a performance was repeated at a "spelling bee" held in Basingstoke in February 1888.

In June of 1888 the couple placed an advertisement in the Glasgow Herald indicating that he had been tutor to the children of Mr. Edward Collins but they were desirous of contracting a new engagement. He provides a few useful biographical snippets including the fact that he was "*late assistant master in Westminster School*" and that he could prepare students for Sandhurst, giving weight to the earlier supposition that he worked for the Rev. Bates at Batcombe. It also states that "*Mrs St B is an accomplished musician.*" The address given for responses is Mayville, Stevenston, Ayrshire. This item adds independent credence to a story concerning St Brody's alleged discovery of *Botrychium matricariifolium* at Stevenston, Ayrshire in 1887, as related by William Whitwell in the *Journal of Botany*, 1898. Whitwell, a friend of St Brody's, recounts that -

"... *He was then {1887} residing, as tutor, with a Glasgow family who occupied a marine villa at that place {Stevenston}. Several other specimens were obtained at the same time. The death of his pupil caused a hurried return to Glasgow, and Dr. St. Brody's own return to London; and in the confusion the plants were mislaid — the present specimen, however, was un-expectedly found last autumn, inside an old catalogue.*"

This is rather remarkable as it is the only claim that the fern has been found in Britain and it seems strange that, despite the confusion, St Brody did not take more care. It is also rather interesting in that the newspaper advertisement seems to suggest that the find was not actually until 1888 (Stace gives 1875). However, death notices in the Morning Post show that Edward Collins, a prosperous Glasgow paper manufacturer lost his eldest son, also called Edward Collins, on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1887. Young Edward was just 12 years old and the family address is given as Hayock's Lodge, Stevenston, corroborating St Brody's account. The Collins family suffered a further tragic loss just two weeks later when their youngest son, Harry, died on 3<sup>rd</sup> October; he was just six years old. Why, despite the claim that he made a hurried return to London, the advertisement for a new post appears eight months later with a Stevenston address, remains a mystery.

His daughter Florence continued with her musical studies and in February of 1889 sat further examinations in Reading. By 1891 she was a member of staff at The South Wales School for Girls, Summerfield Hall, Maestowmmer, Monmouthshire, where she taught harmony and counterpoint. Dr St Brody, Mary and young daughter Gladys were living in Rochester at the beginning of 1891. The doctor is listed as a private tutor and his wife a teacher of music. Newspaper advertisements show that he continued as a teacher and private tutor in Plymouth for some time in the 1890s.

In 1900 a note in the Linnean Society Proceedings records that the Secretary, Mr Benjamin Daydon Jackson, "exhibited a small series of British orchids which had been dried by a new process, by which the flexibility of the plant and the natural colours were in great measure retained." These had been sent him by Dr St Brody, demonstrating that his depredation of the British flora continued. By 1901 he was, at the admitted age of 70 (actually 73) living at the Haven of Rest, Maidenhead, with his wife Mary. Their daughter Gladys (13) was visiting Grace Ephgrave, a Sick Nurse, at Tewin in Hertfordshire; probably already ill, she died at the beginning of the following year.

Dr Gustavus Adolphus Ornano St Brody's life drew to a close on 22 November 1901. He appears to have died in somewhat reduced circumstances after an eventful, if at times difficult, life. Late in 1903 his widow Mary married William Owen, a school slate manufacturer of Ffestiniog and is living there with him in 1911. She seems to have died in 1916. What became of his surviving daughter remains a mystery although there is some suggestion that Pauline Florence Laura St Brody emigrated to South Africa. His origins have not been traced; the name St Brody may not be that which he was born with but rather an Anglicised version of his German or French family name. Every "St Brody" found in the literature or civil records seems to relate to his immediate family.

Richard Middleton