

Whippoorwill E-Comment

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An excerpt from my memoirs — 1959

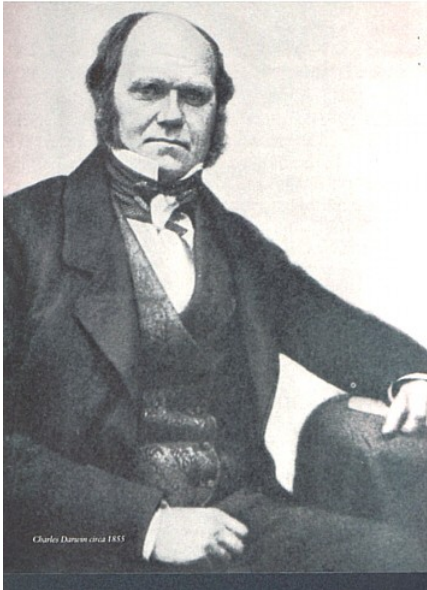
EDMOND RUFFIN JONES

BA & BS 1927, MA 1928, Ph.D. University of Virginia 1930

There were three required courses for all graduate students at the University of Florida The History of Biology, Literature and Institutions, and Biometrics. They were taught by Jones, Berner, and Wallbrun, respectively, and of the three, the History of Biology course was the most boring and demanding. Grades of "A" were extremely rare. E. R. Jones was an upper fiftyish, mature, severely balding, ruddy-faced aristocrat from Savannah. He had long since ceased doing any kind of biology when I first met him. He was a very proper, formal man, who sported a Phi Beta Kappa key, and actually read his notes to us in class. When the class bell sounded, he always took out an old fashioned fountain pen and noted the date where he stopped, and more than once told us that it was amazing, but he had stopped his lecture at precisely the same place in 1939! His voluminous notes were yellowed and brittle with age, and he had to turn the pages carefully so he would not tear them. He often did, but he carried a roll of Scotch tape and made repairs on the spot. There

were dry, flaking, loose scotch tape repairs nearly daily, too, and he removed them from the sheets and applied fresh tape over the ancient tears. We used the Nordenskiold *History of Biology* book which was, and still is, an excellent text, though in his early lectures he commented that the text had been written in Norwegian, and that this translation "left something to be desired." This comment stuck in Bob Weigel's mind because he later commented to me that in order honestly to say that, a man must have read the original Norwegian edition, something we knew was beyond the abilities of an E. R. Jones. Jones also taught Advanced Invertebrate Zoology, another formal lecture, bear of a course. As part of my graduate assistantship, I proctored the lab, and gathered equipment he needed for his single course field trip to the Cedar Key Marine Biology Laboratory in the northern Gulf of Mexico. He was always on his guard, avoiding anything that might suggest fraternization with students, especially graduate students. I took the history course during the

summer of my second year, and found it to be really interesting, though tedious. The other professors all called him "Ruffin," and it was a while before I discovered his full name. The half-dozen graduate students who took the course with me were, as I, resigned to the fact that we were going to get "B's" in the course, no matter what! I made two rather incredible points with him during that hot, humid summer term in that creaky old lecture room.



I enjoyed prowling the main library, and found some book about Darwin that had this photographic portrait of him that looked almost exactly like Jones! I brought the book to class with me and after class that day, showed it to him, telling him that I thought at first that it was a picture of him, but it turned out to be one of Darwin. He puffed up and blushed at the comparison, and quietly admitted to me that this was his favorite photo of Darwin. He asked me my name again, and told me that

he thought that I was a "very observant young man." I later shared this with Glenn Simpson, who asked me about E. R. Jones. When I told him his full name, he asked me if I knew who Edmond Ruffin was. I had never heard of him, so Glenn told me that he had the dubious honor of pulling the lanyard on the canon that fired the first shot at Fort Sumpter, SC, starting the Civil War. He described what an old "war horse" he was, but that he was really the "savior" of the south. The soil had been depleted by large crops of cotton and tobacco, and the land was in ruin. Ruffin introduced artificial chemical fertilizers, and the soil was rejuvenated, literally saving the south. I stored this fact away in memory and casually dropped my intentional bomb in the history class at precisely the right moment, asking Jones if he was related to "the Savior of the South." Edmond Ruffin?" Jones became agitated and admitted that he was proud to acknowledge that Ruffin was a great grandparent, and he fairly beamed when I explained to the class what his role had been in southern agriculture. I didn't mention the Civil War. I got the only "A" in the class that entire year!

Early on in the course, Jones gave us a long list of books and suggested that we read them for additional information. The assignment was an impossible one. It was all we could do to read the heavy, thick textbook and assimilate our notes. I did go to the library where they were on

reserve, and at least looked through the table of contents and flipped through the illustrations of some of them. Most of my fellow graduate students apparently didn't even do that. On Jones' final exam, the ONLY exam in the course, he asked very specific questions of the text, his notes, and on our "assigned readings." He asked us to choose three topics covered in a book entitled *Great Experiments in Biology* and describe them in some detail. This was one book that I had never even looked at! I panicked at first. It was stressful enough having only one exam in a class because it gave the student only one shot to prove his mastery of the basic material. I tried to calm down. My only hope was to guess, to deduce what was in the book, so I thought about what I would have written about if I had authored the book. I guessed at Leeuwenhoek and his first primitive microscopes; Pasteur, and the pioneering experiments he did with spontaneous generation with sealed glass flasks; and Koch and his pioneer bacteriological studies, especially with anthrax and rabies. I wrote lengthy paragraphs on each topic and turned in my paper, then rushed to the library to look through this book. To my immense relief, all three topics were the subjects of separate chapters. I had lucked out for once and got an "A" in the class, but it taught me a valuable lesson. Thereafter, I read *all* assigned materials and took voluminous notes on the material.

Jones was kicked upstairs, shortly

after I completed his course. He became an Assistant Dean in Arts and Sciences, and left biology forever, in reality something he had already done years before I became a student at the University of Florida. Edmond Ruffin Jones was a good and most interesting man, who taught me much more than I realized at the time.

Whippoorwill E-Comment is the personal journal of J. Hill Hamon, of Frankfort, Kentucky, who lives a quiet life in happy retirement after a 36 year career in academia. At Transylvania University I taught a History of Biology course, which was an elective course for biology and history majors, a number of times, as did Bob Weigel at Illinois State University. We still talk about Ruffin Jones, and agree that he was a most interesting character and we feel lucky to have experienced him.



The Whippoorwill Press, my private letterpress, is shutting down, following the examples of so many of my printing friends. I am passing on my types and presses to my former students and friends who will continue to use them. This is a special kind of reincarnation that I am happy to participate in. My press was founded in 1967 with the purchase of a 5x8 Kelsey tabletop platen press and small fonts of Century Expanded types. It has brought me much pleasure through the nearly 40 years it has been active. I will remain active publishing electronically.