

**JOHN C. WISTER**  
**First AIS President**  
**1887-1982**



To most contemporary iris enthusiasts, John Wister is a name in small print on page 2 of each *Bulletin*: "Past Presidents: . . . Dr. John C. Wister." That his name should be there until this year for contemporary irisarians to notice is remarkable, considering that he was the *first* AIS president, serving fourteen years from the society's formation in 1920. But a long life was not the only noteworthy fact about John Wister, it is merely the last fact to be recorded.

Had he departed this realm in the 1930s and 1940s, it is likely that the bulk of a *Bulletin* would have been devoted to a memorial tribute, so large did he figure in iris circles during the early years of iris development, both in this continent and in Europe. But the nature of his force and prominence is of the sort that most easily fades with the passage of time: he was an organizer, a socializer, a catalyst—and a charming personality. He left no irises of his making; instead he left a viable society.

John Wister was the first to disclaim any statement that he founded the American Iris Society. He was contacted in 1918, while with the U.S. armed forces in France, about participating in the formation of a society for irises to be modeled on the American Peony Society, after cessation of hostilities. Enthusiastically he agreed, assisted in contacting other potentially interested parties, was present at the organizational meeting at the New York Botanical Garden, January 29, 1920, and upon formal organization became President. In his voluminous, unpublished history of the American Iris Society from inception to 1934, he puts forth the barest autobiographical facts.

“John C. Wister of Philadelphia, President 1920–1934, was born in 1887, is a graduate of Harvard, 1909, and is by profession a Landscape Architect. He was secretary of the American Rose Society, 1921–1923; member of the Executive Council of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 1919–1934, and secretary, 1927–1934; for three years a director of the American Horticultural Society; since 1930 vice-president of the John Bartram Association. He is Director of the Arthur Hoyt Scott Foundation at Swarthmore College where an arboretum is being established. He has written three books, *The Iris*, *Lilac Culture*, and *Bulbs for American Gardens* (and later, in 1936, *Four Seasons In Your Garden—Ed.*), and many magazine articles on horticultural topics. He has grown irises since about 1910 when he first secured Mr. Farr’s new seedlings. Since that time he has probably grown more than two thousand kinds . . . In addition to the Iris collection, he has about the same number of varieties of daffodils, tree peonies, herbaceous peonies, and approximately 100 varieties of lilacs, azaleas, and chrysanthemums.”

More illuminating notes about Wister the personality appeared in two separate tributes upon his receipt of two distinguished awards. The first appeared in the British Iris Society’s *Bulletin* No. 5 (1927) where were profiled that year’s winners of the Foster Memorial Award (now the Foster Memorial Plaque), “. . . reserved for special and personal award to those who have contributed materially to the advance of the genus.” “MR. J. C. WISTER—President of the American Iris Society and an indefatigable worker in the interests of the genus. Mr. Wister is better known as an organizer of his Society’s success, and a distributor of the products of others than as a raiser. Those members of this Society who were fortunate enough to meet him during his last visit to Europe will have vivid recollections of his enthusiasm and almost canny capacity for spotting a good thing. So overwhelming is his enthusiasm that one is inclined to assume that his whole life and being is wrapped up in this one pursuit . . .”

Four years later, in *Bulletin* No. 38 (January, 1931), the American Iris Society bestowed upon Wister a signal honor with the following tribute:

“Mr. J. C. Wister, President of the American Iris Society since its foundation ten years ago, was presented by the Directors at their recent meeting, with the Society’s Gold Medal, in recognition of his services to Iris culture in America, and particularly in recognition of his unselfish devotion to the Society itself for these ten years.

Mr. Wister is acknowledged everywhere as one of the large influences in American horticulture. His merits have been recognized by medals and other insignia awarded to him by many organizations here and in Europe; and it seemed fitting that the Iris Society should mark this anniversary by some tangible evidence of the widespread respect and admiration which we all feel for him.

The ten years that have elapsed since the Society was founded have been formative years. Countless questions of policy have had to be worked out; many of them by the method of trial and error. The years have not been free from difficulties; but in every situation that has arisen, Mr. Wister has shown himself patient, wise, and resourceful. He has never sought anything for himself, and his disinterested enthusiasm for the cause of Iris culture has inspired in others a like enthusiasm. Every year enhances his reputation as a man with the wisdom and knowledge of the specialist and yet with the modesty of one whose mind is always receptive to new ideas.

He is now one of the greatest living authorities on the Iris, and he has exerted a considerable influence on the course of its development; while through his lectures and his writings he has done much to stimulate the love of gardens among our people . . . All Iris growers in America recognize Mr. Wister as their leader and will certainly approve the action of the Board of Directors in conferring upon him the highest recognition in their power to bestow."

As years passed, AIS became more secure and myriad other horticultural interests claimed more of Wister's time and attention. But as late as 1949, John Dolman—faithful *Bulletin* chronicler of each Northeastern iris season—wrote of, "The Swarthmore College planting maintained by the Arthur Hoyt Scott Foundation under the direction of Mr. John C. Wister. . . . No public display garden of this kind can hope to keep up with the latest novelties, but through generous cooperation of several AIS members Mr. Wister has now been able to bring the collection more nearly up to date than ever before. . . ." And in *Bulletin* No. 116 (January, 1950), Wister wrote of the public iris garden in Cedarbrook Park, Plainfield, New Jersey, stressing the need for such plantings to attract new enthusiasts to irises and to AIS.

It is recorded in AIS Board of Directors minutes that the Distinguished Service Medal was accorded John Wister in 1968. In *Bulletin* No. 191 (October, 1968), Presby Memorial Garden's Director Barbara Walther revealed a few little-known facts about Wister and his relationship to Presby: "Dr. Wister . . . is still active; he lectures extensively, writes books, and is given innumerable awards. Not the least of his accomplishments was the monumental contribution he made toward the Presby Memorial Gardens. He gave unlimited time in landscaping the grounds, showed us how to plant and care for the irises, and painstakingly assembled and donated almost the entire historical section, which is one of the wonders of the iris world today." Anyone who has visited Presby Gardens in iris time realizes the accuracy of her statement.

Although his horticultural work expanded far beyond irises, John Wister maintained contact with various current irisarians. Responding to Bee Warburton, who wrote him about the 1978 International

Iris Congress in Orleans, France, he replied: "You started me remembering: what triggered me was your account of the garden at 'La Source'. Gertrude and I were taken there in 1965 by Mons. Marcel Turbat, the son of Mons. Eugene Turbat that I knew in 1918 when I was still in the Army. I had had many rare trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants from the old Gouchault and Turbat Nursery in Orleans before the war and before the plant quarantine days, so my first leave I went there; and we heard the Cathedral bells ringing to announce the Armistice. It really was the greatest thrill in my whole life. . . .

I went back the next spring the very first day I got out of the Army when everything was in bloom, and I kept up a correspondence with Mons. Eugene as long as he lived, and have been writing to his son ever since . . . I had not heard any news about this 'International' convention. I attended the first one in Paris in 1922 . . . and met Mr. Dykes and Mr. Wallace from England, and of course, the great French iris breeder Mottet (of de Vilmorin), and Cayeux Senior, and Millet and the great Lemoine—all such wonderful people."

The day following John Wister's death, Joan Lee Faust published a eulogy in the New York Times. Much of the material has already been stated here, but she brought up to date the rest of his accomplishments. "An energetic and self-effacing man, Mr. Wister . . . became the first director of the Arthur Hoyt Scott Horticultural Foundation in 1930, and at his death was emeritus director. The foundation's public garden of 240 acres, once described as an 'outdoor gallery of blue-ribbon plants', ornaments the campus of Swarthmore College where Mr. Wister lived. The garden has more than 5,000 species of trees and shrubs. Mr. Wister landscaped 40 acres, grouping plant families together in a practical botanical plan. His goal was to seek out hardy plants that could be grown without special care in eastern gardens.

In recognition of his work with the Scott Foundation, Swarthmore College awarded an honorary doctor of science degree to Mr. Wister in 1942.

He was also the first director of the 600-acre Tyler Arboretum in Lima, Pennsylvania. He served as president of the arboretum and bird sanctuary until 1968.

In 1966 the Brooklyn Botanic Garden awarded its Garden Medal to Mr. Wister for distinguished service. The same year the Royal Horticultural Society of Great Britain dedicated its 'Daffodil and Tulip Yearbook' to him, the first time an American gardener received that honor.

He is survived by his wife, Gertrude Smith, who is also a noted horticulturist."

—Philip Edinger