



## JOHN CASPAR WISTER 1887–1982

John Wister, the first president of the American Iris Society and the moving spirit behind its founding, died quietly at his home in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, on December 27, 1982. He served as the Society's president for fifteen years, chiefly, he said, because he couldn't get anyone else to replace him.

John's interest in irises was already keen in the period before this country entered World War I. While he was serving in the army in France, he made the most of every chance to visit nurseries and public gardens. One important visit was to M. Lionel Millet, who originated SOUV. DE MME. GAUDICHAU and other well-known varieties of that time. During a short trip to Biarritz, he saw *Iris susiana* being sold as a cut flower on the streets.

In mid-May, 1919, John was discharged from the army, with the good fortune of being able to stay in Europe instead of being returned to the United States. He hastened to Chenonceaux to visit M. Auguste Dessert, and there a significant event took place. Irises were in bloom, and "I had my first glimpse of the famous French variety ALCAZAR. I started at once to write down the name of each variety I saw and kept up the custom in each garden I visited thereafter. I used these notes in later years to compile the first check lists for the American Iris Society."

In England he continued his visiting. He saw DOMINION and said the advent of this iris was the most important event in iris breeding in leading to the dark irises. As he visited Bliss, Wallace, Dykes and others, and they questioned him about irises in America, he found to his surprise that he was being looked upon as an expert.

Back at home, John became engaged in the forming of the American Iris Society. He seems to have laid all the groundwork for the whole enterprise, though with his usual modesty he would never admit it. Sixty people gathered at the New York Botanical Garden on January 20, 1920, for this important event. John said that he was railroaded into the presidency.

In 1922 he was back in France, delighted to see quantities of dwarf irises growing on stone walls. An International Iris Conference was held in Paris in late May, where he was appointed Honorary President. Then he went on to England, where he joined a large group of

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Opposite Page: June, 1922 at the Wallace Nursery, Turnbridge Wells, England. Meeting held prior to the organization of the British Iris Society. Back row: John C. Wister, W. R. Dykes, Lee Bonnewitz. Front row: Robert Wallace, A. J. Bliss, Sir Arthur Hort, M. Seraphin Mottet, George Yeld.



British iris lovers. It was at this time that the British Iris Society was founded. According to G. M. Cassidy, the present Hon. Secretary of the society, it was John who was responsible for its formation. He was made an honorary member, and in 1927 received the Sir Michael Foster plaque for his role in promoting the iris.

Although John dabbled a bit in hybridizing, he soon left that to others. But his Germantown garden was full of irises. He wrote for all kinds of publications about irises, he lectured about them, and visited iris lovers from coast to coast. He had long known Grace Sturtevant in Massachusetts and Bertrand Farr near Philadelphia. Mr. Farr's softly-hued QUAKER LADY still graces our garden on the grounds of this Quaker college. He visited the Sass brothers, the Schreiners, the Cooleys, and later, David Hall and Orville Fay, and too many others, amateurs and commercial growers, to name. He admired, quietly evaluated, and made copious notes.

As a landscape architect and lover of plants in general, John's interests went far beyond irises. Great shade trees, smaller flowering trees, lilacs, daffodils, rhododendrons, you name it, odds were he knew something about it. He received their highest awards from the American Daffodil, Peony and Rhododendron Societies, the International Lilac Society, the Pennsylvania and Massachusetts Horticultural Societies, and the first Liberty Hyde Bailey Medal given by the American Horticultural Council. He was embarrassed by the beautiful gold medal given by the American Iris Society as he completed the tenth year of his presidency because the woman who made the presentation kissed him.

As he grew older, walking became more difficult. He used two canes at the 1970 convention, and when the convention was in Philadelphia in 1976 he could only attend the banquet, and that in a wheel chair.

He was a quiet man, with a deep personal reserve. But his enthusiasm made its mark. A friend has said she saw him as a catalyst. The truth of this can be seen in the founding of the two iris societies, the encouragement and kindness he showed to so many, in the plants he loved to share which often led to the recipient developing a keen interest in the kinds of plants he had been given.

In 1927 his simple little book *The Iris* was published. It still has much to tell a beginner, although the garden varieties listed have long been outmoded. There is a list of recommended varieties of many types and also a black-list of varieties he thought should be discarded. The book ends with a verse of Longfellow's:

"O Flower-de-Luce, bloom on, and let the river

Linger to kiss thy feet!

O Flower of Song, bloom on, and make forever

The world more fair, and sweet."

—Gertrude S. Wister