

In Memoriam: Currier McEwen 1902-2003

by Chandler Fulton, Massachusetts

IN HONOR OF HIS CENTENNIAL YEAR, THE GOVERNOR OF MAINE proclaimed June 22, 2002 "Currier McEwen Day," and on that day a Currier McEwen Centennial Garden was dedicated in Harpswell Historic Park. Surrounded by devoted family and friends, and thoroughly enjoying the event, Dr. McEwen cut two birthday cakes provided by the Maine Iris Society. He died a year and a day later, peacefully, with family present, while recovering from injury caused by a fall. The world lost a great man and a great friend when Dr. McEwen left us on June 23. His 101 years were full of achievements. Until the last few weeks of his life, he made important contributions for which he will long be admired and remembered.

Osceola Currier McEwen was born on April 1, 1902, a native of Newark, New Jersey. He always enjoyed recognition that his birthday occurred on "April Fool's Day." His father was a physician crippled by severe arthritis, and it was natural that his son chose to become a physician who devoted his life to such diseases, a rheumatologist. He received his bachelor's degree *Magna cum laude* from Wesleyan University, and his M.D. degree from the New York University School of Medicine (NYU) in 1926. He completed his internship at Bellevue Hospital. After postdoctoral research at The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (now Rockefeller University), where he rapidly rose to Chief Resident and Associate Member, he was called back to the faculty of NYU in 1932, and also appointed an Assistant to the Dean. In 1937 the Dean, his mentor and close friend, suddenly died, and Dr. McEwen became the youngest Dean of Medicine in the United States up to that date. With an interruption during the Second World War, he



Photo: Yves VanDamme

continued to serve as Dean until 1955, and retired as Professor Emeritus of Medicine in 1970.

At NYU, in addition to his work as Dean, Dr. McEwen built a world-renowned interdepartmental Rheumatic Diseases Study Group that was among the first to receive large federal grants, achieved many important discoveries about arthritis and rheumatism, and trained many students. He published over 200 papers, and remained the leader of this group until 1968. He made many contributions through his administration, teaching, and patient care. Although the quarters at the medical school were aging and cramped, Dr. McEwen managed to attract outstanding researchers until, by the 1950s, the medical school had a basic science faculty unmatched elsewhere in this country. To improve the facilities, he was instrumental in the creation of the NYU Medical Center, which opened in 1947. Overall, he played a significant leadership role in changing our knowledge and treatment of arthritis, and indeed in the modernization of the practice of medicine that occurred during the mid-twentieth century.

Dr. McEwen achieved much of his great impact through his extraordinary leadership capacity. He possessed uncanny people skills. When he talked or worked with someone, he made that person feel they were the center of his universe. He described the "important" project that urgently needed to be done, and soon the person was happily recruited to help him accomplish the goal. Few have possessed this skill to the extent Dr. McEwen did. This skill contributed to many of his remarkable achievements. As a young physician, he was invited to accompany the Rockefeller family on a trip west; years later this contact was crucial in the development of the Medical Center. As another example, in the late 1930s he was approached by Albert Einstein, and together they collaborated to rescue about twenty Jewish doctors and scientists from Nazi Germany, which was made possible by providing them appointments at NYU.

Family was an important component of Dr. McEwen's life. In 1930 he married Katherine Cogswell; they raised four remarkable children. Until his retirement, they maintained a home in Riverdale, New York. He attributed some of his longevity to the daily mile-long walks each way from NYU to the commuter train. From the year he was born, he summered with his family in South Harpswell, Maine, and in 1952 he purchased a cottage there, atop a bluff overlooking Casco Bay. In early years this house—which he rebuilt—served as a place for relaxing with family and for sailing. In 1970, when he retired, he and his wife moved to Harpswell. There were few rheumatologists in Maine, so in addition to consulting all over the state he helped out with a rheumatology

practice at the Regional Memorial Hospital in nearby Brunswick. Revered as "the Doc", he selflessly helped many neighbors before he finally retired from medical practice in 1988. He often received a bag of lobsters or produce for his services.

We remember him here, of course, because of his second career: as a hybridizer and student of beardless irises. This interest began when he was still fully engaged in medicine, and gradually expanded to become his major occupation for the last third of his life. Although Dr. McEwen achieved many of life's milestones very early—for example, he was born prematurely, he became an M.D. at 24, and then the country's youngest Dean at 35—he started his second career late. He was nearly 60 when he began hybridizing. Yet because of his long and vigorous life he left a 40-year legacy of major contributions. He started with daylilies. In 1960, while attending a meeting in Chicago, he visited Orville Fay, who was using colchicine to induce tetraploidy in daylilies. Then after 43 daylily introductions, Dr. McEwen decided there would be more scientific challenges with less studied beardless irises. He tried colchicine with Siberian irises, and succeeded. He introduced the first tetraploid Siberian iris, ORVILLE FAY, into commerce in 1970, and it quickly won the Morgan Award. Later he succeeded in obtaining tetraploid Japanese irises, and began to introduce these. As one product of the remarkable combination of intelligence, enthusiasm, talent, and good fortune he famously called "McEwen luck," he produced the first yellow Siberian iris, the wonderful BUTTER AND SUGAR (1977), now sold in nurseries all over the world. Although he produced many great diploid cultivars, he focused much of his energy toward developing new tetraploid Siberian and Japanese irises, the truly new "species" he had invented. He was always pioneering, always pursuing elusive goals, introducing "my best blue to date" and several years later superceding it. He pursued new colors, new forms, new patterns, repeat bloomers, greater flower longevity, better cold tolerance, miniatures, and other new attributes. He was always looking forward to what might be achieved, as with DREAMING YELLOW (the parent of BUTTER AND SUGAR), DREAMING ORANGE, DREAMING GREEN, and DREAMING BROWN. His irises bring many of us pleasure every year. Some of them, notably RUFFLED VELVET and BUTTER AND SUGAR, are among the ancestors of a substantial fraction of today's Siberians. Some of his Japanese iris are recognized, even by Japanese experts, as among the best ever introduced, including JAPANESE PINWHEEL. The legacy of his irises continues in gardens all over the world. Several of his disciples are continuing his breeding projects, especially with tetraploids. In addition, some of his irises

continue to be evaluated and increased for introduction in Sharon Hayes Whitney's garden. A favorite new Siberian iris, which he registered as MERRYSRING in 2000, is from the 8th generation of his tetraploid breeding program. It is among those being propagated for future introduction. His legacy leaves over 160 new introductions of Siberian and Japanese irises that could not even have been imagined before his efforts.

In addition, Dr. McEwen wrote over 100 articles about irises, many of them with a scientific emphasis. He served as Chair of the AIS Scientific Committee from 1985 to 1992, and remained active on the Committee until his death. He was a founder of the Society for Siberian Irises, and also played a leadership role in the Society for Japanese Irises. He left us major books on *Japanese Irises* (1990) and *The Siberian Iris* (1996). Each of these books is a masterpiece, not likely to be superseded for a long time, in part because he managed to involve the entire community of experts in providing information to make the books authoritative, and in part because of his spare, elegant, lucid writing.


He received many honors for his contributions to irises. Four of his Siberian irises received the Morgan Award, including BUTTER AND SUGAR, which was honored a second time by receiving the first Morgan-Wood Medal. Five of his Japanese irises received the Payne Award. He was honored with the Hybridizer's Medal of the American Iris Society in 1976, the Foster Memorial Medal of the British Iris Society in 1977, the Luther Burbank Award of the American Horticultural Society in 1995, and the highest honor our society can bestow, the AIS Gold Medal, in 1999. There were many celebrations of his centennial last year. Days before his death, a Siberian Iris Convention was held in Hamilton, Ontario, June 12-15, 2003. The Convention, which of course he was unable to attend, was "dedicated with great respect and affection to Currier McEwen, the Father of the modern Siberian iris."

He started his hybridizing in Riverdale. In anticipation of his retirement, in 1966 he bulldozed and established a garden next to his Harpswell home, "Seaways Garden," where subsequently many of the great Siberian and Japanese irises were bred, and where he so graciously welcomed many of us, including the unforgettable gathering at the 1990 Japanese Iris Convention.

Dr. McEwen's wife Kay died in an automobile accident in 1980. Her death ended a rich and fulfilling half-century partnership. In 1982 the Doctor, an energetic and robust 80, married Elisabeth Fulkerson, who had been a family friend. They enjoyed more than 20 wonderful years of a joyous, close relationship. Elisabeth survives him, as do his four children, Ann Standridge, Matilda Mendez, Katherine Goodrich,

and Dr. Ewen McEwen, as well as six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Many of his finest irises are named after family members, from a Siberian iris named CHATTER BOX BELLE after his eldest daughter, who loves to stay in a one-room cottage, the Chatter Box, on the bluff at Seaways, to a Japanese iris named KATY MENDEZ, after his oldest grandchild.

He possessed an ability to lighten everything, from managing hospitals for casualties during World War II to any difficult discussion, with his great and warm sense of humor. On July 12, 2003 family, friends, and neighbors packed the Elijah Kellogg Church in Harpswell, Maine—across the road from the Centennial Garden dedicated to him a year earlier—for a memorial service for Dr. McEwen. The program for the warm and thoughtful service honoring him gave the dates of his life as April 1, 1902 to June 23, 1903. So much accomplished in so little time. Was this his final joke? In any case, he would have appreciated it. Dr. McEwen taught us a lot about irises and even more about how to live a marvelous life. His own life was remarkably long and very full. While he knew it was time for him to leave, and was ready, it does not prevent those left behind from missing him. Those who knew him will miss his example, his inspiration, his advice and mentoring, his enthusiasm and joy, and his friendship. His impact will live on through his achievements, the irises, the books, the knowledge and wisdom, the friendship and inspiring example he set for us all. His work has become an important part of our world.

[A more detailed celebration of Dr. McEwen's life, written in honor of his centennial, may be found in the October 2002 issue of the AIS Bulletin. That issue also contains some photographs of him.] 

In Memoriam

Joe Griner (NJ)
Mrs. Mela Kirk (WA)

Alfred J. Kaiser (MA)