

Jim Willis's Gladstone bag

Ron Hateley



Jim Willis's Gladstone bag was added to the collection of historical items held at the University of Melbourne's School of Forestry at Creswick in 2000 after it was obtained accidentally by David Williams, a former student of the School, in extraordinary circumstances. David and his wife were guests at the marriage of one of Jim's grandchildren. At the reception they were placed next to Julie Lyons, another of Jim's grandchildren, whom they had not met before, but who had inherited her grandfather's bag. By the end of the evening, Julie was convinced of the importance of Jim's botanical work and the significance of his connection with Creswick, and she later asked David to arrange for the bag's inclusion in the School of Forestry's collection of historical items.

James Hamlyn Willis (1910–1995) was one of the most successful graduates of the School of Forestry, where he was a student from 1928 to 1930. After graduating he became a Forests Commission field officer. With his transfer to Melbourne in 1937, Jim was chosen by the Forests Commission to be supported in obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in botany, chemistry or geology. Only one such offer was made each year. Jim naturally chose botany. He went on to join the National Herbarium of Victoria

as a taxonomic botanist and showed many of the same characteristics in his botanical work at the Herbarium as its founder, (Baron) Ferdinand von Mueller, had done. An energetic field explorer, he collected and classified thousands of specimens to augment the herbarium's collection of more than a million specimens.

Jim had a high standing internationally, with links to European herbaria, but he was also involved in many community organisations, using his knowledge and talents to promote an understanding and appreciation of nature. He published some 883 scientific and popular papers, books, pamphlets, essays and reviews,¹ alone or jointly, including his supreme achievement *Handbook to plants in Victoria*, published in two volumes in 1962 and 1972 (this was superseded in the 1990s by *Flora of Victoria*, a work involving several volumes and many authors). Several of his publications are included in the Creswick collection.

Jim gave 60 years of service to professional botany, horticulture and natural history. He retired in 1972 from the Royal Botanic Gardens. For his contributions to natural history he received the Australian Natural History Medallion in 1960. Other honors were bestowed by the Australian Institute of Horticulture,

the Society for Growing Australian Plants, the Australian Conservation Foundation, and the National Trust of Australia. He was recognised for his taxonomic research and publications on native flora with the Royal Society of Victoria's Research Medal, and a Doctorate of Science from the University of Melbourne, among others. In 1995 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

When Jim died in 1995, aged 85, Leon Costermans' obituary in *The Age* described the importance of the owner of the Gladstone bag, writing that in any discussion on the 'greats' of 20th century botany in Victoria, the name Jim Willis would invariably come to the fore. That he was known simply as 'Jim' to all—from international scientists to home gardeners—is an indication of the respect and affection felt towards him.

The well-worn brown leather Gladstone bag bears the letters *J.H.W.* embossed in gold on the side. Hinged luggage of this type was first developed in Europe in the late 19th century; the bag was named after British Prime Minister William Gladstone, who was an inveterate traveller. The Gladstone bag was ubiquitous in the first half of the 1900s and modernised versions replaced it in the 1970s. The worn appearance of this example suggests that it accompanied Jim on many

Opposite: Dr James H. Willis, June 1981.
Reproduced with permission from the Archives,
Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.

Right: Gladstone bag, maker unknown,
20th century, leather, metal and other materials,
length: 32.0 cm. Originally owned by James
Hamlyn Willis. Gift of Julie Lyons, 2000,
University of Melbourne School of Forestry,
Creswick.



of his field expeditions. Like Gladstone and von Mueller, he was peripatetic and, like them, he travelled without his own motorised assistance. Jim never owned a car and never obtained a driver's licence.

The Willis bag's poor condition may be important in telling us something about its history and use. Jim was an urbane character who probably would not have carried a badly scuffed and worn bag on his daily commute between Brighton and the Herbarium. The leather handle has peeled back from the top, and this has not been caused by careless storage as there is no rust on the metal parts of the bag. This suggests that the bag may be the one he used in his wanderings in the bush, at least during the early part of his career. The bag would have been new when his initials were embossed on the side.

The Creswick collection includes three related items that record the genesis of Jim's interest in botany as a student, and predict his later success. The first is *Synopsis of the indigenous plants occurring within a 10-mile radius of Creswick, Victoria, Aust.* (which has never been published but photocopies of which are now used to assist Landcare groups and others interested in describing local vegetation as it was in the 1940s); several beautiful watercolours of fungi; and botanical specimens

collected by Jim and which are now in the School's herbarium.

The detailed observations recorded in Willis's *Synopsis of the indigenous plants* reveal that he must have tramped over a large part of the local area, starting during his time as a student at the School of Forestry but followed up later. The *Synopsis* was completed on 8 October 1933 and a note was added on 15 December 1934 that he had revised the list and added 20 species. These new records were attributed to the work of a later student and close friend at the School, Dick Bond, who graduated in 1934. Both were enthusiastic botanists, and they could have become famous together. Tragically, Dick was soon to be stricken by blindness. After leaving Creswick, Jim returned there at times (probably fairly often, as he courted and married Mavis Howe, a local girl) and his study of the nearby area continued. He brought the list up to date on 8 October 1944, and again on 28 March 1952.

Jim's travels further afield covered the whole of Victoria, assisted by a wide network of naturalists, as environmentally-minded people were then called. His association with the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, which he joined in 1932, was important, and he became an editor and a regular contributor

to *The Victorian Naturalist*, and a leader of countless expeditions. His humility and generosity mentioned in Costermans' obituary meant that his wide circle of friends were keen to help outside these formal expeditions. One of them was the iconic Little Desert naturalist Keith Hateley, who recalled in his declining years that he had enjoyed 'carting Jim around and botanising with him'.

Jim Willis's Gladstone bag is historically significant for its association with Victoria's greatest botanist of modern times, and it is representative of a type of hinged luggage no longer in use. Its worn condition attests to its use over many years and it probably travelled with its owner over much of Victoria as he extended his botanical knowledge and compiled the most comprehensive list of Victoria's flora in the middle of the last century.

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Note

- 1 Rachel Tropea with Andrea Barnes and Fay Anderson, 'Records of James Hamlyn Willis', Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, 2000, updated 2007, www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/guides/will/about.htm accessed 18 November 2010. Willis's papers are held in the Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.