Reflections upon Oak-Happy Days -
The International Oak Society to 2012

Past Presidents Allen Coombes, Eike Jablonski,
Ron Lance, and Guy Sternberg

Who are we, where did we start, where are we going, and what has happened to us along the way? We asked our past presidents for their thoughts, memories, and projections. Here is what they said!

Allen Coombes, Fourth President

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The year 1994, which featured both the First International Oak Conference and the birth of the International Oak Society, was in several ways, a turning point in my life. At that time I had worked at Hillier Gardens for 9 years, and immersed myself in the diverse collections, but hesitated to take the plunge into the genus *Quercus*. My attendance at the 1994 conference was not planned but was as a result of meeting Bill Hess earlier that year. In 1989 Hillier Gardens received seed from the Morton of *Q. shumardii var. acerifolia* (now *Q. acerifolia*) and it must have been shortly afterwards that I saw the paper by Stoynoff and Hess in which
this was given specific status. At the time I was more interested in horticultural
taxonomy and it was at a conference in Seattle on this subject that I first met
Bill, talking about *Q. acerifolia*, and he informed of the coming conference at
the Morton.

Thinking back to that first meeting makes me realise just how much things
have changed. Both those meetings in 1994 were arranged without the use of the
internet or email. Today it is difficult to imagine how we could manage without
them. The meeting was attended by the keen oak collectors and growers of the
day, many of whom are still with us. I remember meeting Susan Cooper, Guy
Sternberg, Mark Coggeshall and Kevin Nixon for the first time as well as many
others. From the Hillier collection I brought a small shoot of an oak that Harold
Hillier collected on his only visit to Mexico, and from Kevin’s talk on Mexican
oaks I recognised it from one of his photos as *Q. hypoxantha*. Kevin kindly
confirmed this and he and Guy invited me to join their trip to collect in Mexico
the following year.

Without that invitation I almost certainly would not be where I am today.
Maricela Rodriguez, who became my wife in 2001, visited Hillier Gardens with
the Kew botanic garden management course in the summer of 1995 and we
arranged to meet later that year in Mexico.

The oak enthusiasts that attended the first meeting, as well as later ones, are
hungry for two things: acorns and information. In those days there were not large
numbers of oaks available to collectors. Oaks were collected, sometimes, along
with other plants and people took the luck of the draw. This is one thing that the
Society has changed dramatically. Inspired by the enthusiasm of those I met, for
more than 10 years, and with the help of generous sponsors, I targeted the oak-rich
areas of the world, from the US and Mexico, to China and Taiwan. Many other
members have done the same in the last 15 years, to such effect that Grimshaw
and Bayton in *New Trees* (which devotes 69 pages to oaks) state that “It is almost
impossible to keep up with the flow of oaks into cultivation.” Grimshaw also
adds “Of all the trees in this book, *Q. rysophylla* is the one that made the greatest
impression on me.” I can still remember the seedlings of the first introduction to
Britain at Hillier Nurseries.

If there is one aspect on which the Society has had at least as much effect
it is on the information available on oaks. In 1994 there was little information
generally available, unless you happened to be the lucky owner of Trelease or
Camus. I remember trying to identify the *Q. rysophylla* at Hillier Gardens without
luck. I even took one of Harold Hillier’s seedlings to Kew (the source of the
tree there) and tried to match it with material in the herbarium. As it was not
represented there, Nigel Taylor visited to collect a specimen and kindly named it
from the illustration in Trelease. Most oak enthusiasts would now recognise this
magnificent tree, which is even available commercially.

Today the story is very different. Apart from *New Trees*, which documents
recent introductions, all oak lovers must know, if not possess, the magnificent
*Guide illustré des Chênes* by Antoine le Hardy de Beaulieu and Thierry Lamant.
With its splendid photographs, many taken during conference tours or at members’
collections, this unrivalled work will stand as the ultimate publication on the genus
for many years. Many oak collections have benefited from the renewed interest
in the genus. One in particular features in *The Oaks of Chevithorne Barton*, by
Michael Heathcoat Amory, founder and owner of this, one of the largest oak
collections in the world, now documented in a book of more than 200 beautifully illustrated pages.

Of course, the web has also had a profound effect on making information on oaks available. Apart from the website of the International Oak Society at http://www.internationaloaksociety.org/home two additional sites, the Oak Names Checklist at http://www.oaknames.org/ and the Oaks of Chevithorne Barton at http://www.oaksofchevithornebarton.com/ are discussed in the article The Tale of Two Sites in this issue.

I think everyone will agree that we have come a very long way since those early days, and that this is largely the result of inspired people inspiring others. In 1994 it would have been difficult to imagine where we would be today, just as today it is difficult to imagine where we will be in 20 years from now. We do know that the aims of the Society will remain the same, to bring together oak enthusiasts from around the world. There will always be oaks to collect and names to debate. The membership may not be enormous but we know they are keen and that is what counts for now and the future.

The retirement of Guy Sternberg as editor of International Oaks and as a board member (with others perhaps not far away) signifies a change of era. We should recognise that all our achievements to date have come about under Guy’s leadership or at least guidance and inspiration, but we have a strong and experienced team in place to guide the society through whatever challenges it may face in the future.

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Eike Jablonski, Third President

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In the beginning of the 1990s, three students of dendrology and horticulture (Erik Schulte, Ulrich Wuerth, and myself) became aware of the richness of the genus *Quercus*, when mapping the Hanover Botanic Garden in Germany. The garden cultivated at that time 27 different species of that genus. Impressed with this fact, we started to dig more deeply. In our scientific university library, we came across one name frequently: Dick van Hoey Smith. After making contact, we got an invitation from Trompenburg, invited by Dick to stay in his house and learn more about the oaks. Late spring 1992, we found ourselves in paradise: in the midst of the famous Arboretum Trompenburg! Dick and his wife Riet invited us to stay, and we had a two day intensive lesson about oaks and all dendrology. At the end, we were given a large, grey publication: “The” Journal of the International Oak Society, No. 1! I became a member immediately. That time, in 1992, I got a letter back from Nigel M. Wright and his wife Lisa: they were happy to inscribe me as International Oak Society (IOS) European member No. 18! I was so very proud.

This was the serious start to my work with oaks, first at university and later in my job as lecturer for dendrology and horticulture (specialty ornamental woody plants) in Luxembourg. I made a lot of friends in joining all the early events which have been arranged. Soon I organized my own tour to Germany (Kassel and Berlin) and a tiny piece of Poland (Muskau). Trips with oak people to China, Turkey, several places in the U.S.A., Spain, and Portugal, to name but a few, have strengthened
my friendships with IOS members and my personal work with oaks. This all was reinforced when attending the International Oak Conferences, sometimes as a contributor as well. These early days of the IOS were somewhat adventurous in times, but always they have been accompanied with deep personal friendships. Many oak introductions into Central Europe (Germany, Holland, Belgium, Poland, and Austria) could have been made due to these contacts and travels.

The IOS developed in these early years many important features which make it so important in the scientific and horticultural world today. The description of new taxa in oaks, either species or cultivars, is a very important role for the IOS which must continue if we are to remain the leading authority for oaks in the world. The recognition of outstanding work connected with oaks, and thus the creation of two different awards, is another important feature.

I had the privilege to serve in the IOS as a member of the board and our third president for several years, always together with a group of fantastic people. This time was (and still continues to be) very intensive in the sense of working together on various oak issues as a team, and I was taught many important things by my fellow colleagues.

Now, after 20 years, we cannot lie down and look back upon these things which we have reached thus far. We need to focus again and again on things like environmental impacts upon oak stands; we have to continue our work as oak registrar within the ICRA; we must keep an eye on the complex of new diseases and other harms to oaks, and also on entire oak habitats. But scientific work is not the only focus. We must keep the membership informed about all this, but we also have to keep in mind that we are a community of different people who share the love of oaks in common and reach out to every member. We need to continue the seed exchanges, the personal exchange of ideas and knowledge, and the many events we make, sharing our experience with oaks in the wild and in the garden. We need to interest younger people in many countries for all of this, to keep our membership mixed and diverse. We need to continue to be an open society for all those diverse people who love oaks. Thus, we need to listen to the needs and wishes of our membership, like we did all these years so successfully.

I hope that the International Oak Society will prosper in the future as it has in the first two decades of its existence. Wishing all the best to the IOS!

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Ron Lance, Second President

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There is no particular time in my life when an interest in oaks uniquely usurped my interest in other types of trees. On the other hand, oaks were a highly significant part of my dendrological renaissance after a forestry course in high school. As my familiarity with local trees grew, along with the realization of my immense lack of familiarity with all trees, oaks became one of my favorite focal points among throngs of hickories, magnolias, maples and birches. It was not long before I was collecting and planting them, then finding employment that entailed connections with such. About 20 years later, the International Oak Society entered my perspective.
It was 1993, I think, and I was satisfactorily established as Nursery Manager at The North Carolina Arboretum. A modest but intriguing publication came to my desk, introducing a fledgling International Oak Society. The black-and-white drawings and short articles about oaks and oak-related matters suggested that I might find fun and friends among this group of people. There were, incidentally, not a lot of people in the IOS at that time. When I attended the First IOS conference at the Morton Arboretum in 1994, the organizational meeting that followed was a tightly-fitted assemblage of friendly people in a less than roomy meeting room. Still, the atmosphere was frisky with talk of oak and things an oak society member could do next. I drove all the way back to Asheville, North Carolina that last night of the conference without fatigue, fueled by oak stimulant. There were also oak trees and acorns in the vehicle, silent passengers with stories that were up to me to tell, if I could find an audience at the Arboretum. If not, I’d try to make one.

As subsequent years accumulated, oaks grew vigorously in my nursery, landscapes, and notions. I became a solicitor for oak planting at my place of work and broadened collections of oaks at home. Adding exotic oaks was the natural course of events, encouraged by a few IOS members who liked sharing acorns as much as I did. By 1997, at the Second Triennial Oak Conference in California, I was anxious for treks to see California oaks, and got them. A more memorable tree trip I had not encountered before. Overly excited perhaps, I wanted to share in the showing of oaks, and suggested the next conference be at my place of employment in the year 2000.

I had not been a Conference Chair before, but the IOS is full of helpful folks, and I had fellow Arboretum staff members who did nearly anything I asked of them. Maybe because it had to do with oaks, trees that no one seems to dislike, it was made easier. Collecting acorns, growing seedlings for the plant sale, arranging the tours, hotels and food, selecting speakers, planning the schedule, all this and more consumed a sizable chunk of my life and energy, particularly in those last months before the conference. In retrospect, it remains one of the most fulfilling periods in my working life.

Elected the second President of IOS at the Business Meeting of the 2000 Conference, I then began a new personal era in the Society. The first 6 years of involvement had been an introduction to the IOS and its oaky people, a time of making friends and solidifying contacts. The next 6 years spent working in officer status of the IOS board amid the gears of the administrative machine was a bit different. The responsibility was neither burdensome nor frustrating, yet it had a few challenges that make those years memorable. The Oak Tour in Spain in 2001, organized by Francisco Vasquez, was a particular delight. The 2003 Conference in England was my last function as President of the IOS, and I am still unsure who was more entertained there, me by all the uniqueness of the opportunity, or fellow participants who stifled chuckles during the culture clash. It is not expected by many heretofore farm boys from Southern Appalachia that they one day would be attending and speaking at formal dinners in England. Nevertheless, the conference had great segments for everyone.

At the end of my following post as Secretary in 2006, after another excellent Oak Conference in Texas, I remained on the IOS Board but felt a bit relieved to return to the bench and off the main playing field. Lots of things were going on in my life and my growing of oaks had taken a hiatus. Still, by the time the 2009
Conference in Mexico arrived, I was eager to attend. A trip to see Mexican oaks in the mountains of that country had been on my wish-list for a long time.

Now, it is nearly time for another IOS Conference, 18 years since the first one. I find it hard to grasp the reality of my near 20-year affiliation with the IOS. This has lasted longer than any one job or marriage that I’ve had. In contemplation, perhaps it is the oaks that provide the binding that lasts. These trees are inspirational in many ways, and have the potential to outlast all of us, whether we marvel at them or not. No matter the human temporarily claiming to own the land upon which oaks may grow, the trees make do in spite of us. To me, the best part of all these IOS years has been its organized opportunities that allow quercophiles as well as broader-interest dendrologists to gather, scheme, and visit oaks in their natural realms; also to allow us to adopt a few and call them our own (for a while). I hope that venture, and the IOS, can continue.

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Guy Sternberg, First President

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This group of oak friends was born in the 1980s as a way to facilitate the exchange of a few seeds across international borders. The steps taken by Steven Roesch to do this catalyzed a movement far beyond the expectations of any of us who were with him at the beginning. We are now about to hold our seventh triennial members’ meeting; we have an impressive web site; we conduct scientific tours around the globe; we hold conferences and member meetings in oak-rich, accessible areas; we have become the ICRA oak names registrar; and even this journal and the newsletter are moving into their third decade. We have hundreds of members on several continents, and we are the go-to place worldwide for anyone interested in oaks. As my country-boy friend down the road would say, “Who’da thunk it?”

This progress is the result of the dedication and imagination of many people. Oaks (surely the most important tree genus on the planet!) bring together many people with divergent yet overlapping interests and a very broad spectrum of capabilities. In this respect, oak people are like the oaks themselves.

Our gallery this year (starting on page 112) features some Oak Society images from my file that might no longer exist anywhere else. They depict a history that will be recalled fondly by some of you and revealed to the rest of you in a way that is intended to recharge your batteries and give the IOS a boost into the future. It all began, officially, with a conference in 1994 that we hoped might attract several dozen people. That quickly outgrew its intent when the room capacity of 170 people registered well in advance and more came to stand outside in the hallway with the hope of listening in. A few of you still remember that day, and you might have shared with me the overwhelming sensation that we had a tiger by the tail!

Then that evening, shortly after the Iraq/Kuwait “Mother of all Battles”, we conducted what we called the “Mother of all Seed Exchanges.” We had anticipated that some of the participants would bring a few seeds to share. When everything was set out, we had five large library tables piled high with labelled acorns, with more on the floor below, and every conference since then has carried...
on this tradition. I have a special fondness for the trees I grew from those seeds I took home from that first event.

The next day, those who could stay overnight reconvened for our first organizational meeting. Topics were solicited in advance and served as a loose agenda, with the ultimate goal of forming an organizing committee to incorporate and become “official” in every way. All of this was accomplished with telephone calls and written notes (often in longhand) sent by ordinary mail. E-mail was not a factor back then, and things such as smart phones, Skype, interactive web sites, video conferences, and webinars were yet to be invented.

Those who participated in the first American tour in New Mexico will remember it forever, and we gladly endured some Spartan conditions in order to help our less wealthy participants meet expenses and to see as much as possible in the allotted time. When the campsite flooded, we all crammed into a couple of inexpensive motel rooms, literally camping all over the floor; when the vehicles got stuck on washed-out wilderness trails, we all moved boulders, changed tires, and pushed together; when the Gila River rose after a violent hail storm, we held onto logs and waded across together, holding one another up as we pushed through the floating ice. There were no fancy hotels, no leisurely breakfasts, and no political welcoming speeches that week!

I still have the historic registration book from our first meeting (it’s too large to publish here) giving the signatures of all who made it happen. I might bring it to our conference this fall so you can try to find the names of people you recognize. It is part of our archive—the record of our conception—and if you know any of the people signed in there (or if you are one of them) please be sure to give (or accept) all the credit due.

What lies ahead for us?

What about our future? We continue to evolve, but we must remember our roots and our base. We are not an organization restricted to expert taxonomists and wealthy elite who can speak fluent botanical Latin and travel anywhere at will. We must keep our message and our activities targeted to all of those whom we serve—ourselves.

So then, who are we? From the beginning we always have been about one-half North Americans, one-third Europeans, and the remainder from all corners of the Earth. We are a diverse blend of people with interests varying as much as the oaks we study. We should reflect that ratio in our conference locations, our publications, and everything else we do, while taking extra care to welcome and be meaningful to those who are not in the majority; our diversity, too, must be respected. Following, then, are some thoughts for your consideration at the triennial members’ meeting later this year. You may agree with some and not with others, but come prepared to discuss them or give your proxy to someone who shares your views. Let’s grow together.

The volunteer Board of Directors and committees exist to serve the members, and in return, the members should do their best to assist the Board. We are an open society as Eike has noted, and I hope there will be increasing interaction among all interested members and their Board. Having general member meetings
once every three years is no longer sufficient to provide the guidance and help the Board needs in our fast-paced world, but we realize that most of us cannot afford to convene more often. Society members should be proactive in seeking out Board members and expressing their ideas, and/or they should volunteer to become more directly involved.

Following the same line of reasoning, Board meetings should be as transparent and inclusive as possible, and Board discussions should be accessible to any member who is interested. This is how we started, and this is how we can build a working team and groom future Board members and committee leadership. Board actions must be decided by the Board of Directors only (this is why they are elected) or we could never get anything done, but those actions should be subject to influence and oversight from every member who has something to contribute.

I also suggest including in every newsletter not only a summary of Board actions, but also proposed agendas for future deliberation so that members may contribute their ideas in advance—award nominations, budget priorities, member recruitment, conference and tour locations, policies and procedures, volunteering for committees, whatever. Many members will not visit the web site regularly, and some do not even have convenient Internet access; yet we cannot afford the space to place extensive Board discussions in our print publications. I think abbreviated summaries are a good compromise, and anyone who wants more detail can follow up at that point. We need to give all members an opening to get more involved, develop a vested interest, and hopefully become prospective future leaders and Board members.

Let’s keep our events affordable, attractive, and accessible to as many members as possible, and provide engaging reports and proceedings for those who are unable to participate in person. We are an egalitarian group where wealth, knowledge, and status should not matter, and parity should drive our decisions. For example, future conference expenses need to be cut back in our uncertain economy. Our first conferences were simple, inexpensive affairs that did not include extravagant banquets with chamber music and liveried waiters. The first one (1994) had 20 exhibitors whose booth fees paid all transportation costs for the foreign speakers and furnished simple, inexpensive refreshments during conference breaks. There were no conference-hall rental fees (the space was donated by the Morton Arboretum), no fancy dress codes requiring extra baggage for travel, and no expensive evening programs or live music; yet nearly 200 people attended, and 35 of them stayed on to hold our first organizational meeting. I believe an inexpensive, accessible conference that focuses upon oaks more than upon dinner-jacket receptions will attract the most members (and their money, and their seeds, and their participation), especially now, as everyone struggles to stay fiscally solvent. We can pass along some of the savings to participants, and keep the rest to help maintain our treasury. This will also help to avoid setting an intimidating standard for the conference hosts who follow.

Tours are a different matter, by nature involving very few people and disproportionately comprising those most capable of travel. If tour participants occasionally wish to have a more grand experience they should be free to do so. We should still offer more budget-priced tours, however, for those more interested in oaks than in luxury.

Publications should appeal to the full cross section of members and should be user friendly. The most frequent feedback I have had as journal editor over the
past decade has been to continue to strive for accuracy, simplicity, and diversity, maintaining a broad range of content to provide something for taxonomists and gardeners alike. Full color is an option that we cannot afford unless we find supplemental funding, but it was very popular when we used it and it should be considered again if such funding becomes available. The newsletter should remain concise, current, and readable, with an on-line option to speed delivery and save cost. It always should include organizational news such as Board reports and events. The web site should be as comprehensive as possible, yet simple to navigate, and it should be usable by members who do not have broadband connections. Of course, all of this is easy to suggest but requires a huge commitment of volunteer effort to accomplish.

This leads to my final appeal. I know, perhaps more than anyone else, how much work it has taken to keep this organization intact and moving forward. We currently have some outstanding, dedicated Board members, and some of us fight tooth and claw over what we believe is right for IOS because we care very much about this organization and its mission. This autumn, several excellent people will join me in retiring from the Board, and we have recruited what I believe will be an outstanding “freshman class” to replace us. But transition never ends, and we always must be thinking about the more distant future. This means that you (yes, YOU!), if you are not already involved, should give consideration to participating more, in whatever way you are able.

Here is your incentive: Many of my very best friendships, worldwide, have come from this group. Many of the special places I have seen, with the help of other individual members or via our tours, are places I never would have found (or even known about) without the IOS. Many of my most interesting arboretum visitors from exotic places around the globe come because they are IOS members. Most of the best things I have learned from other people about oaks came from our conference speakers, our publications, and my conversations with knowledgeable members. Our quercetum at Starhill Forest has grown into the most comprehensive NAPCC-certified oak reference collection in North America with the help of countless IOS members. Thus, the more active you become, in whatever way you can contribute, the more rewarding will be your own experience. It certainly worked for me!

A diverse mix of impressive authors have prepared some very special papers for this volume. I hope you will find the combination to be as interesting and motivating as has ever been published here. I especially appreciate the thoughtful essays our past presidents have contributed to this retrospective section of our journal. It is our way of saying goodbye (now, or soon enough) and good luck. Now the future is up to you.