

Tansley's eyebrows

Christopher D. Preston
Cambridge, U.K.

Corresponding author: cdpr@ceh.ac.uk

This pdf constitutes the Version of Record published on 28th August 2026.

Abstract

Participants at a celebratory lunch hosted by Cambridge University Press to mark the publication of Clapham *et al.*'s *Flora of the British Isles* in 1952 received a menu card with a caricature of Sir Arthur Tansley as a tree, labelled *Supercilius tremendus*. I suggest that this label refers primarily to Tansley's eyebrows, rather than his character.

Keywords: Arthur Tansley; Cambridge University Press; Clapham, Tutin & Warburg; *Flora of the British Isles*; humour

Introduction

Botanical ephemera can sometimes reveal more about contemporary attitudes than material which has made its way into print only after a more protracted period of consideration and review. A nice example of such an ephemeral item was discussed recently by Wilkinson & Cameron (2023), who described and illustrated a printed invitation to "A Luncheon to mark the publication of *Flora of the British Isles*" by Clapham *et al.* (1952), or CTW, held on 24 March 1952.

The striking feature of the menu is the front of the folded card (Fig. 1), which bears a "caricature of someone looking very much like Tansley, drawn as a tree – albeit a rather anthropomorphic tree that looks ever so pleased with itself. And the sign at the tree's base (as if it was a specimen in a botanic garden) is labelled 'SUPERCILIUS TREMENDUS'" (Wilkinson & Cameron, 2023; the caricature is also reprinted by Wilkinson, 2025). Sir Arthur Tansley (1871–1955), knighted in 1950, had played a key role in the genesis of CTW as it was he who suggested to Tutin that he should write a new *Flora*, making the suggestion on a winter afternoon when Tutin and Humphrey Gilbert Carter called in at Tansley's house for tea (Gilmour & Walters, 1975: 2). Tansley chaired the editorial committee of a projected *New Students' British Flora* on behalf of the Clarendon Press, an ambitious project which had been underway since 1933 and was still (theoretically) in progress (Briggs & Gorringe, 2002), hence the particular significance of his invitation. Tansley wrote the Foreword for CTW and the three authors acknowledged him for his "constant encouragement" (Clapham *et al.*, 1952: xvii). Wilkinson & Cameron (2023) discuss the way in which Tansley was perceived by his colleagues, and indeed by a more hostile observer, the novelist Virginia Woolf, and suggest that the caricature of the tree was a tease, the "supercilious characterization of the caricature tree" gently poking fun at Tansley's "apparent pomposity".

I believe that there is a further dimension to the caricature, which both confirms Wilkinson & Cameron's view that the caricature shows Tansley, and throws more light on the tease. This is explored in this brief paper.

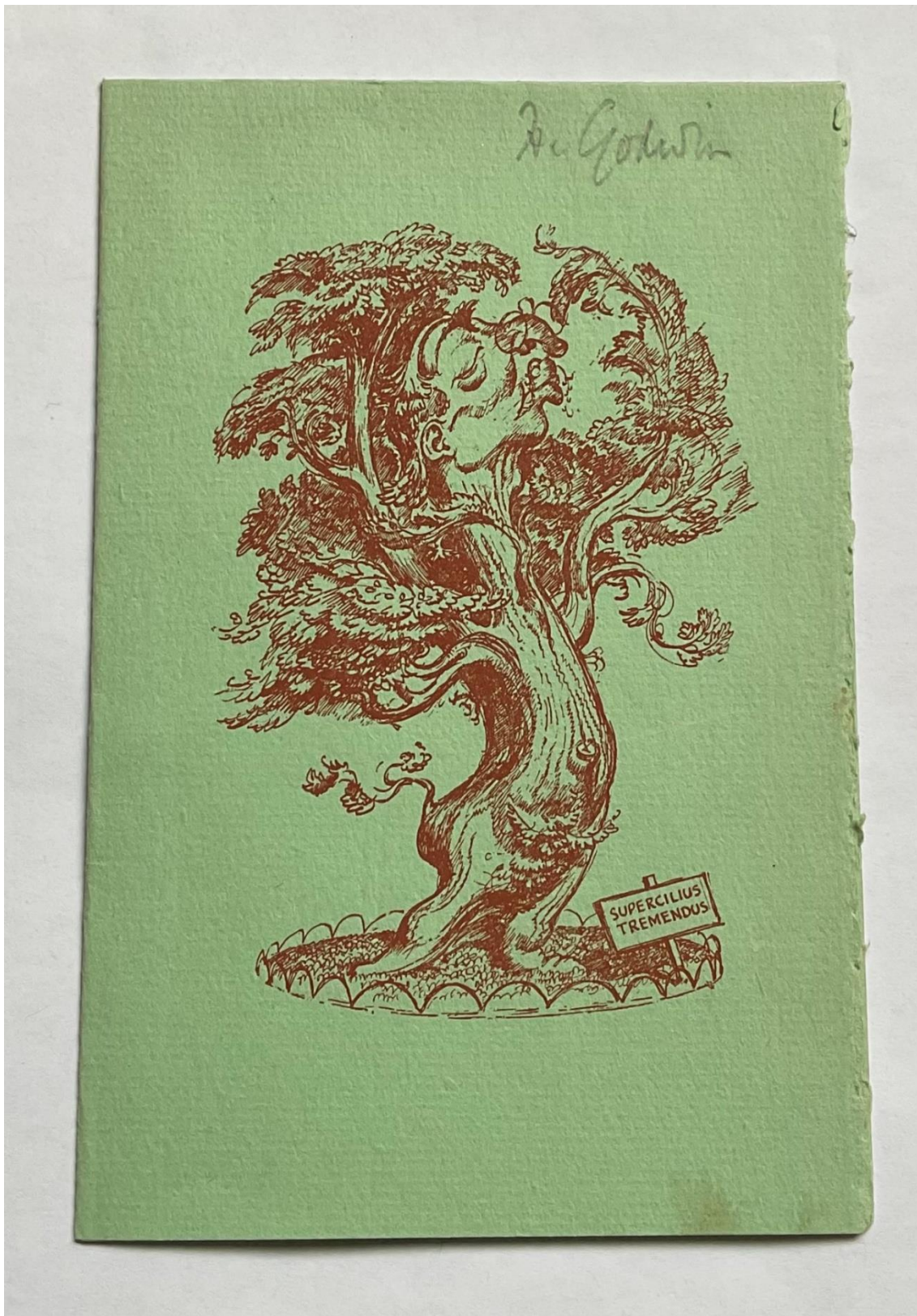


Figure 1. Front cover of the menu card discussed in the text

The dual meaning of *supercilium*

The Latin word *supercilium* has two main meanings, as a concrete noun for the eyebrow and the abstract noun denoting pride, arrogance or related traits. Both meanings have come down to us in English but the adjective supercilious, “haughtily contemptuous; having or assuming an air of superiority, indifference, or disdain” (OED) is much more familiar than the concrete noun supercilium, meaning the eyebrow. The concrete meaning does survive, however, in anatomical terms such as the superciliar arch or superciliar ridge, the ridge above the human eye, and in the more familiar descriptive terms for birds such as supercilium (a stripe above the eye). The epithets *superciliaris* and *superciliatus* are used, albeit rarely, for plant species such as *Andropogon superciliatus* (now *Dichanthium sericeum*), a grass with rigid hairs like eyebrows on one of the glumes (Hackel, 1885), *Begonia superciliaris*, so-named as the leaf laminae resemble eyebrows (Lin *et al.*, 2017) and *Calamus superciliatus*, a rattan with dense, long spines around the mouth of the leaf sheath (Baker & Dransfield, 2017).

The interpretation of the caricature

The meaning of supercilium as eyebrow opens up another level of interpretation of the caricature, as photographs and portraits of Tansley in his later years show that he had very prominent, bushy eyebrows. These include the photograph of Tansley in the 1930s reproduced by Ayres (2012), the illustration based on a colour photograph that accompanies Godwin’s Biographical Memoir (1957) and portraits by L.J. Watson (Stamp, 1969) and W.G. de Glehn (Godwin, 1958); they are even visible on the well-known group portrait *The naturalists* by L.J. Watson, reproduced by Marren (1995).¹ The man in the tree caricatured on the lunch menu does indeed have a very prominent eyebrow on the one eye that is visible, and this is strong evidence that it is indeed Tansley. Humphrey Gilbert Carter, the other possibility discussed but rejected by Wilkinson & Cameron, had much more ordinary eyebrows, as shown by the photographs in his memorial volume (Gilmour & Walters, 1975).

The ‘SUPERCILIUS TREMENDUS’ caricature can therefore be seen initially as a tease relating to Tansley’s eyebrows. This may have already been something of a standing joke amongst the Cambridge botanists. Tansley’s daughters have described how Humphrey Gilbert Carter was the outstanding figure of their childhood in the years before he left for India in 1913, and he continued to delight them when he returned to Cambridge in 1921. They remembered him for his wildly exciting games and his sometimes outrageous behaviour; “the medical bias of Humphrey’s humour” was sometimes exercised at Tansley’s expense (Gilmour & Walters, 1975: 10–11). Godwin also referred to Gilbert Carter’s “mischievous medical-school jocularities” which could disconcert the prim (Gilmour & Walters, 1975: xi). Would Tansley’s eyebrows have escaped mention in this atmosphere of irreverent jocularities? In any event, recognition that the caricature might initially refer to Tansley’s eyebrows also makes its presence at a celebratory occasion on which Tansley was a particularly distinguished guest much more understandable. It was a ‘collusive’ joke of the sort discussed by Wilkinson & Cameron (2023), and would clearly be seen as an affectionate tease, whereas a reference to a not especially admirable character trait

¹ For discussion of some of these portraits of Tansley, see Radley (2020).

might in the circumstances have seemed unnecessarily cruel. However, the word has two meanings, and the double meaning would of course have been apparent from the 'genus' of the tree, SUPERCILIUS, especially if there were those who did indeed find an element of superciliousness in Tansley's manner.

The host of the lunch

There is no indication of the host of the lunch on the menu, or the venue, though the fine printing of the card suggests that it might have been hosted by the publisher of the *Flora*, Cambridge University Press (C.U.P.). This is confirmed by letters in the C.U.P. archive. On 24 January 1952, at the end of a long letter to Frank Kendon discussing the production of the illustrations by Sybil J. Roles which were to complement CTW, Tutin added "Clapham, Warburg and I would like to have a party in Cambridge to celebrate the the [sic] appearance of the text which we understand is to be hoped for in a month or so. We hope you will join us and would be glad if you could suggest a possible date, preferably on a Friday or Saturday, so that I can make the necessary arrangements". However, C.U.P. must have taken over as hosts as it was Tutin who wrote to thank R.J.L. Kingsford on 27 March 1952, three days after the lunch: "I must thank you again for the great pleasure you gave us on Monday; it was more than we deserved but we enjoyed it immensely". Kingsford assured Tutin (31 March 1952) that "We here greatly enjoyed the lunch and it was a privilege to entertain you and your helpers".² Both Kendon and Kingsford attended the lunch and signed the menu card. Kingsford was the Secretary of the Press and Kendon, a poet, writer and illustrator, was an Assistant Secretary; Kendon was "a fixture in Cambridge, and the nearest thing to an editor that the Press could boast" (Black, 1994: 53; see also Black, 1984: 206 and Wilkinson & Cameron, 2023). Also present was R.W. ('Dick') David, a keen amateur botanist, who had succeeded Kingsford as London Manager of the Press when Kingsford moved to Cambridge as Secretary; he had played an important part in making CTW "a remarkable piece of learned printing" (Black, 1984: 231).

Unfortunately, perusal of numerous potentially relevant files in the C.U.P. Archives, and in George Salt's papers in King's College, Cambridge, have failed to reveal any information about the caricature on the menu card.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Rosalind Grooms, C.U.P. Archivist, for much guidance, to Patricia McGuire and Tom Davies for help at King's College Archive Centre and to Syaivo Dmytryk for similar help in the Cory Library. I thank Juliet Anderson and Weina Jin for discussion of the caricature, Dave Wilkinson and Laura Jean Cameron for their comments on a draft of this paper and Dave Wilkinson for kindly providing the copy of the caricature for reproduction.

References

- Ayres, P. 2012. *Shaping ecology: the life of Arthur Tansley*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Baker, W.J. & Dransfield, J. 2017. More new rattans from New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (*Calamus*, Arecaceae). *Phytotaxa* 305:61–86.

² Cambridge University Press archive 3/1/5/448, Cambridge University Library.

- Black, M.H. 1984. *Cambridge University Press 1584–1984*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Black, M.[H.] 1994. Dick at the Press. In: Davies, L.A., ed. *Dick David remembered by his friends*, pp. 48–64. Birmingham: privately published.
- Briggs, D. & Gorringe, E. 2002. The struggle to produce a Flora of the British Isles (1933–1952). *Watsonia* 24:1–15.
- Clapham, A.R., Tutin, T.G. & Warburg, E.F. 1952. *Flora of the British Isles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilmour, J.S.L. & Walters, S.M., eds. 1975. *Humphrey Gilbert-Carter: a memorial volume*. Cambridge: University Botanic Garden.
- Godwin, H. 1957. Arthur George Tansley 1871–1955. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* 3:227–246.
- Godwin, H. 1958. Sir Arthur George Tansley, F.R.S. 1871–1955. *Journal of Ecology* 46:1–8.
- Hackel, E. 1885. Die auf der Expedition S.M.S. "Gazelle" von Dr. Neumann gesammelten Gramineen. *Botanische Jahrbücher für Systematik, Pflanzengeschichte und Pflanzengeographie* 6:233–248.
- Lin, C.-W., Chung, S.-W. & Peng, C.-I. 2017. Eleven new species of *Begonia* (Begoniaceae) from Sarawak, Borneo. *Taiwania* 62:219–251.
- Marren, P. 1995. *The new naturalists*. London: HarperCollins.
- Radley, D. 2020. *The art of nature conservation*. PhD thesis, University of Nottingham.
- Stamp, Sir Dudley. 1969. *Nature conservation in Britain*. London: Collins.
- Wilkinson, D.M. 2025. Ninety years of ecosystems. *British Wildlife* 37:165–170.
- Wilkinson, D.M. & Cameron, L.J. 2023. Teasing Tansley? A 'tremendus' caricature from the launch party for the Flora of the British Isles. *British & Irish Botany* 5:259–266.

Copyright retained by author(s). Published by BSBI under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License](#).

ISSN: 2632-4970

<https://doi.org/10.33928/bib.2026.08.191>