

Early Donation of Plant Portraits

By Maureen Lazarus

TWO MONTHS after the official opening of the National Museum of Wales by King George V in April 1927, a Miss Gwendolen M. Crowley of Eastbourne wrote to the Keeper of Botany, H. A. Hyde, offering some specimens of botanical drawings of which she had 200 altogether. Hyde naturally accepted.

In her letter of 8 June, Miss Crowley replied how delighted she was that the Museum had accepted her drawings which represented 54 of the Orders of flowering plants. She then added that she was including similar paintings done by her mother, Mrs. Curtis Crowley, her sister, Marion and an aunt, Mrs. E. F. Crowley of Alton, Hants. and Eastbourne, bringing the



● Common Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) by E. F. Crowley

total number of watercolours to 367. Some years before, Gwendolen and her sister had started a Botanical Painting Club with the idea of painting as many wild flowers as possible and these were the results of that interest.

An inscription, written on the back of one of Marion Crowley's paintings - a Grape Hyacinth (*Muscari comosum*) - states that it was an illustration of one of three specimens found in a field at Froyle near Alton, in May 1890, an area much frequented by the ladies. While it was not considered a native of Britain, it was freely distributed throughout most parts of the community. The inscription continues with the words 'Known also as Tassel-Hyacinth. See Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*'.

This reference to Curtis is most interesting as it alludes to William Curtis (1746-99), the son of a tanner from the same Alton in Hampshire who had an early training as an apothecary. His interest in plants was aroused by a botanically-minded ostler at the Crown Inn in Alton with whom he explored the Hampshire countryside. In 1772 he became 'praefectus horti' at the Chelsea Physic Garden in London. Curtis's *Flora Londinensis* (1775-87), the earliest of the illustrated floras in England, was intended to include all the wild flowers growing within 10 miles of London. The ladies of the Crowley family were, therefore, following in the footsteps of one of the most famous British botanists.

Part of the work currently being undertaken in the Museum's Botany



● Common Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) by E. F. Crowley

Department deals with the conservation of such drawings. Many have been kept in less than ideal conditions in the past. These drawings have been cleaned with vinyl erasers and will soon be re-housed in archival boxes designed specially for delicate material. Inert polyester envelopes are also used to prevent abrasion and acid migration.

During the initial condition survey that revealed the Crowley drawings, several other collections were discovered to be in need of some conservation. These are being dealt with as part of the conservation and documentation project and, it is hoped, will stimulate further interest in material which has previously been largely inaccessible.