

Thorvaldur Johnson, 1897-1979

G. J. Green



Dr. Thorvaldur Johnson passed away September 15, 1979, at Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he had lived since 1923 when he began to work for the Canadian Department of Agriculture. He was born in 1897 at Arnes, Manitoba, of Icelandic parents and attended schools at Arnes and at Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. After serving with the Royal Air Force in World War I he obtained a B.Sc. degree in Biology from the University of Saskatchewan in 1922 and a B.S.A. in Field Husbandry in 1924. Graduate

studies at the University of Minnesota were undertaken immediately and resulted in an M.Sc. in 1925 and Ph.D. in Plant Pathology in 1930. In 1935 he married Veiga Arnason who was a constant source of help and encouragement throughout his career.

Dr. Johnson was first employed by Agriculture Canada in 1923 as a Seasonal Plant Disease Investigator. A few years later he was appointed Plant Pathologist, and in 1946 became Director of the rust program at Winnipeg. He became Officer-in-Charge of the Plant Pathology Laboratory in 1953 and in 1959 was appointed Director of the newly established Winnipeg Research Station. He retired in 1962 after an outstanding scientific and administrative career.

He began studies on physiologic specialization and hybridization in the cereal rusts in collaboration with Dr. Margaret Newton in 1926. Their work gained world-wide recognition. During much of his career he was associated with plant breeding programs and made important contributions to the production of rust resistant cereal cultivars for western Canada. Besides wide-ranging studies

on the rusts he also made noteworthy contributions on oat blast, brown necrosis and *Alternaria* blotch of wheat, melanism of wheat, the occurrence of *Leptosphaeria avenaria* Weber f. sp. *triticea* T. Johnson on wheat, and cultural variability in *Septoria avenae*. Probably his most important work was that on the genetics of *Puccinia graminis* which contributed to an improved understanding of host-parasite relations in the stem rusts of cereals.

In addition to being awarded a fellowship in the American Phytopathological Society in 1966, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1950. He also was made a Fellow of the Agricultural Institute of Canada in 1958 and an Honorary Member of the Canadian Seed Growers Association in 1963. The University of Minnesota awarded him the Elvin Stakman Award in 1958 and the Outstanding achievement Award in 1959. He received the Gold Medal of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada in 1962, and was appointed to the Order of Canada in 1971. He received an Honorary D.Sc. from the University of Manitoba in 1962 and an Honorary LL.D. from the University of Saskatchewan in 1967.

Thorvaldur Johnson was a good friend to the many contemporaries who came into contact with him. He was a charming and hospitable person who spent a great deal of his time helping others. He was a scholar of the highest order and integrity and had a great love for classical music, flowers, and gardening. He was deeply interested in literature and authored many popular articles as well as over 70 scientific papers. He was especially interested in limericks and several of those he wrote were published. He exemplifies a small group of dedicated Canadian scientists whose achievements contributed much to the economic development of western Canada. If their efforts to control rust had been unsuccessful, wheat production in the rust-affected area would have been seriously threatened.