

22 September 1898–23 December 1986

*Dr. R. Gordon Wasson, outstanding amateur scientist, explorer, and traveler, died 23 December 1986. Like many of his kind who in the Victorian era contributed so much, he was an amateur scientist in the original sense of the word amateur, being a lover of the relentless pursuit of knowledge in his chosen field of ethnomycology.*

*It was my privilege to have known Gordon Wasson, and to have worked closely with him during my association with the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, first as a student assistant and later as a staff member, from 1982 through 1985.*

*A man of august bearing, insatiable curiosity, and insistence on meticulous accuracy, Wasson was aptly described by a British colleague as "the perfect old-fashioned gentleman, with a twinkle in his eye." Although best known as an ethnomycologist, Wasson was at home in numerous apparently unrelated fields.*

*Wasson was born in Great Falls, Montana, where his father served as an Episcopalian clergyman, and spent his childhood in Newark, New Jersey, where he attended the public schools. He was sent by his parents at age 16 to France and Spain, where he spent more than a year learning the languages and vagabonding. In the First World War he served in the American Expeditionary Forces, enlisting in the spring of 1917 as a private, and saw 14 months of service in France as a radio operator. He was graduated from the Columbia School of Journalism in 1920, and was awarded the first Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship that was ever granted. He studied at the London School of Economics and spent the spring of 1921 walking through the Peloponnesus with Axel Boethius, who later became famous as a Roman and Etruscan archaeologist, founder and head of the Swedish Academy in Rome. On his return in the fall of 1921 he taught in the English Department of Columbia University for a year, where his students included the poet Langston Hughes.*

*In 1926 Wasson married Valentina Pavlovna Guercken, a White Russian and a physician, who died in 1958. They had two children, Peter and Mary Xenia, who survive.*

*Wasson worked as a journalist for several years, and later entered the banking profession with the Guaranty Company of New York in 1928, and was sent shortly afterwards to Argentina and then to London for long periods. In 1934 he joined the staff of J. P. Morgan & Company, where he remained until 1963, from 1943 on as a vice president. He even served a term as a member of Harvard University's Visiting Committee to the Slavic Department.*

*Wasson and his late wife were pioneers in ethnomycology, and promoted it as a distinct and promising branch of ethnobotany. They wove mycological information with data from many fields—history, linguistics, comparative religion, mythology, art, archaeology, and others—to analyze and explain the role of fungi in the cultural development of numerous peoples. They explored the philological aspects of the vernacular names of mushrooms, the uses to which mushrooms were put in early times, and the aura of mystery that surrounds them; they hypothesized that the peoples of the world could be separated into "mycophiles" and "mycophobes." In 1952 the poet Robert Graves sent the Wassons an article that mentioned*



the discovery in 1938, by Dr. Richard Evans Schultes, of the survival of the use of intoxicating mushrooms among the Indians in Mexico. Immediately Gordon Wasson telephoned Schultes at Harvard; the confirmation and encouragement he received focused his attention on Mexico. Beginning in 1953, Tina and Gordon Wasson organized yearly research expeditions to the remote mountain villages of the monolingual Mazatec Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico, and in 1955 were the first outsiders in modern times to participate in the midnight rites of the cult of the sacred mushroom. They announced their discovery in 1957 in their jointly written book *Mushrooms Russia and History*. Long unavailable, there is now such a demand for this book that it is shortly to be republished.

Following Valentina's death, Gordon continued his research, working closely with Dr. Roger Heim, the world-famous French mycologist and Director of the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle*, who had accompanied the Wassons on several expeditions to Mexico. In 1958 they published *Les Champignons Hallucinogènes du Mexique*; this was followed by a second volume, *Nouvelles Investigations sur les Champignons Hallucinogènes*, in 1967. Many of the mushrooms used in the Oaxacan mushroom rite were previously unknown to science and were described by Heim. Roger Heim even named a new species of *Psilocybe* in honor of Wasson: *Psilocybe Wassonii* Heim. The Mexican mycologist Gastón Guzmán named a species of *Psilocybe* after both the Wassons: *Psilocybe Wassonorum* Guzmán.

On his retirement from the banking business in 1963 Wasson went to the Far East, where he gathered material that led him to publish, in 1969, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, written in collaboration with the Indologist and Vedist Wendy Donniger O'Flaherty, in which he dealt with the Soma enigma. The ancient Aryans had worshipped a plant of that name, one of the very few plants that has ever been made a god, but the identity of the plant had been lost. Wasson undertook to prove that it was a mushroom, *Amanita muscaria* L. His book stirred up violent controversy among scholars who specialize in ancient Hindu culture and religion, the reception on balance being favorable for Wasson's theory.

On his return from the Orient in 1965 Wasson moved to a beautiful country home in Danbury, Connecticut, where, until his death, he devoted his energies wholly to ethnomycology, traveling widely in Mexico, Europe, the Far East, and Oceania, and to prolific writing. From his penetrating research and correspondence with eminent scholars in diverse fields around the world have come further trail-blazing volumes and technical papers, in which are set forth discovery after discovery.

As a result of his ethnomycological research in the field, in museums, and in libraries, he made contributions to other aspects of ethnobotany, including investigations of hallucinogens from the higher plant families and the discovery of a new psychoactive *Salvia* from Oaxaca.

In 1974 Wasson, working closely with George and Florence Cowan, experts in the Mazatec language, and Willard Rhodes, a musicologist, published *Maria Sabina and her Mazatec Mushroom Velada*. This book, 15 years in preparation, gives the complete transcript of a sacred mushroom ceremony, held to diagnose a serious illness, that Wasson recorded in the field in 1958. The entire proceedings are printed in Mazatec, along with translation into Spanish and English, and accompanied by linguistic and musicological analysis, color photographs, and four LP records.

*In spite of the slight scholarly notice given to this work, Gordon often said that he was more proud of it than of any of his other books.*

*In 1978 he published with Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD, and Carl A. P. Ruck, a Classical Greek scholar, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*, with a new translation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter by Danny Staples, in which he set out to show that the Mysteries of Eleusis were based on ergot of rye.*

*Wasson, Ruck, and Staples collaborated with Jeremy Bigwood and Jonathan Ott in inventing a new word, entheogen—a plant substance that so gripped the imagination of our ancestors in prehistory as to lead to profound religious feelings.*

*Late in life Wasson wrote *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*, published in 1980, in which he elucidated the details of the religion of the Indians who held the mushroom sacred, a subject which had been largely ignored by scholars until then.*

*His gift to the Harvard Botanical Museum, in February 1983, of the Tina and Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection, established the only ethnomycological library in the world. A research facility, supported by a fund given by Wasson, this library contains more than 4,000 items, not only books but also photographs, films, videotapes, stereo slides, prints, and watercolors, as well as an extensive collection of art and archaeological objects, and his entire scientific correspondence. When his books were transferred to the Botanical Museum, one of the most gratifying assignments that I have ever had was the organizing of this library and the related collections.*

*Just prior to his death Wasson completed his final book, *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion*, which added further evidence to support his thesis that the entheogens dominated in prehistory the religion of Eurasia. *Persephone's Quest* includes contributions by Stella Kramrisch, Ott, and Ruck. It has just been published by Yale University Press, but Gordon did not live to see the final version printed and bound.*

*Wasson attended and participated as an invited speaker in numerous national and international symposia. He was a member of the Society for Economic Botany, and was President (1972) and Distinguished Economic Botanist. His devotion to scientific research led to his appointment as Research Fellow in Ethnopharmacology in the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, a position he held from 1963 until his death. He was honored in 1973 by election as a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. Yale University's Peabody Museum awarded him in 1983 the Addison Emery Verrill Medal for distinction in the field of natural history. The citation accompanying the medal read in part:*

*All of your many writings have that touch of clear and good writing and of immense erudition that mark the true scholar. You have combined aspects of anthropology, archaeology, and botany into an organic whole; you yourself are the embodiment of the word amateur, which in its original sense means 'a lover of things.' You have obviously loved your subject . . .*

*The University of Bridgeport conferred on Wasson the degree of Sc.D. on 26 May 1974, in recognition of his record of research and writing, and the New York Botanical Garden, with which he was associated for many years, named him Honorary Research Associate and Honorary Life Manager.*

*Gordon never sought publicity for himself because of his discoveries, and contin-*

ued working quietly on each successive book, but there is a documentary film in preparation, dealing with Tina and Gordon Wasson's lifelong work in the development of ethnomycology, made with Gordon's cooperation in the last few years of his life.

In addition to his ethnomycological writings, he also wrote a book analyzing the process of historiography, *The Hall Carbine Affair*, which went through three editions between 1941 and 1971. This book grew out of his banking career and his interest in the history of J. P. Morgan & Company; it was a definitive refutation of the false story that the Morgan Company owed its early success to a deal in arms on the eve of the Civil War, in which, it was alleged, J. P. Morgan sold a large quantity of defective carbines to the U.S. Army. Wasson not only proved that the story was false, but he also traced the process by which a fictitious tale may be told and retold, embellished at every step, until it acquires the status of a fact among those eager to believe it.

Gordon Wasson also published numerous articles over the years, dealing with finance, foreign policy, linguistics, literary criticism and history, and the nature writer W. H. Hudson. Gordon, like Hudson, loved birds and animals, and he was completely content in his home in the country, observing the deer in the orchard, the hummingbirds in the honeysuckle vines on his porch, or the family of skunks that lived in his yard. He was as gentle and kind as he was intellectually tenacious and erudite, and he will be deeply missed by his many friends. He died two days before Christmas at the home of his daughter in Binghamton, New York. His remains were cremated, and his ashes were interred on 2 January 1987 at a beautiful and simple ceremony in the Bethlehem Chapel of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC.

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