

FIFTY YEARS OF DEVOTION TO THE AQUARIUM HOBBY

by *George S. Myers*

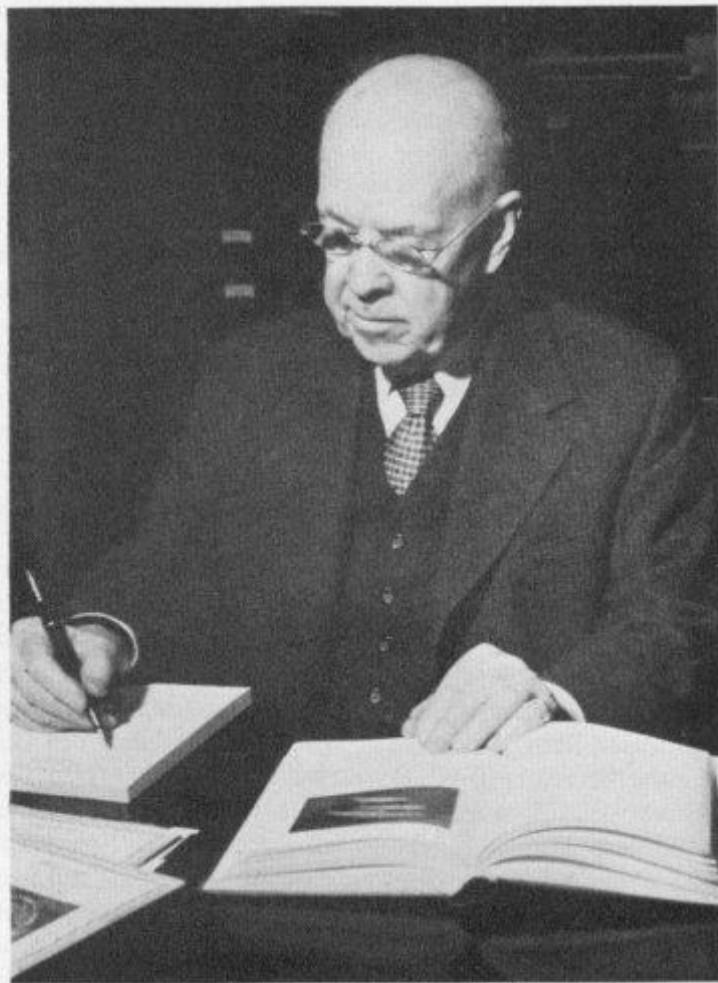


Photo by Alan M. Fletcher

WILLIAM T. INNES AT WORK ON THE 17TH EDITION OF HIS BOOK,
"EXOTIC AQUARIUM FISHES"

ON FEBRUARY 2, 1954, William Thornton Innes, 3rd, will be eighty years old. His associates have asked me to do a sketch of him for *THE AQUARIUM* as a kind of birthday present, not only for him but for the hundreds of thousands (millions maybe) of aquarists he has helped. I

am glad I was asked, for Bill Innes is a remarkable person as well as a remarkable friend, and I think I know him about as well as anybody outside his own family. Besides, those who know him only through his books and his magazine can't know his many-sided greatness. For he is a great man, no

matter how much he may protest such an evaluation.

To start off, I think we had better give a little of Bill's history. Some of it was gotten out of him, under protest (he disapproved the whole idea of this sketch)—and I am going to give it, for it should be on record.

Bill was born on February 2, 1874, on the northwest corner of Third and Spruce Streets, Philadelphia. His mother, Eleanor Kirkbride, was born to a Quaker father and a mother of Welsh parentage. His father was a newspaper compositor who was over 40 when the linotype machine came in, and was therefore considered not eligible to learn the new method. Seeing the end of his job as a hand compositor, he pulled out and started a small print-shop of his own.

Young Bill had taken a job as copy boy, errand boy and salesman with another printer, but before long he joined his father. They bought a small plant at 200 South 10th Street and Bill taught himself job press work, doing both the press feeding and the selling. Bill's brother joined them a year or two later, and Innes & Sons, Printers, was born. Before the first World War, they moved to the present location, at 12th and Cherry Streets, where the firm has long upheld its reputation for fine printing.

Bill, however, had long shown interest in the water and aquariums. His maternal grandfather's home backed on the Delaware River at Bristol, and here was a spring on the lot, built with a hogshead sunk in the ground. The spring was overflowed by high tide and each day there would, at low tide, be different fishes left in the hogshead. These fishes fascinated young Bill and he wanted them badly, but he never succeeded in catching any. At another time he saw a goldfish caught with the

herring at Bristol and carried off in a bucket by a man. Bill says he never finished wishing for that goldfish. Again, he was given a glass bowl that had been used by his mother to cover wax flowers. He set it in a wood and plaster-of-paris base and made a fish bowl of it. Its only inhabitants were snails from the Schuylkill River, but it was an *aquarium*.

The things which lead people into their chosen lines of work are always interesting. Bill Innes' twin passions have been aquariums, and photography, and he got into both and into the aquarium publishing business through the same incident.

Madame Nordica was giving a concert in Philadelphia and Bill, a long time music enthusiast, admired an engraving of her on an announcement he saw in a shop window. He begged the portrait from the shopkeeper and stood it on his desk. An insurance salesman who dropped in saw it and admired the fine photography. Bill already was itching to try photography, as he says, and the salesman turned out to be secretary of the Columbia Photographic Society, only two blocks from Bill's home. Bill joined at once and started out on his still-continued photographic hobby. At one meeting Bill told a member about putting some goldfish into his brother's pond. The member turned out to be a member also of the Aquarium Society of Philadelphia and invited Bill to the next meeting. Upon seeing the magnificent goldfish exhibited, his conversion to the fish hobby was instantaneous.

It soon developed that a member, Heman T. Wolf, had spent much time on the manuscript of a goldfish book and the pen drawings to illustrate it. Finding no publisher he told Bill he was on the point of burning the whole thing up. Bill read the manuscript. As a result, Innes and Sons published

Wolf's *Goldfish Breeds and Other Aquarium Fishes* in 1908. Bill's father set the 385-page book beautifully and entirely by hand in his spare time. At three dollars per copy, the edition took ten years to sell out and the firm lost about a thousand dollars on it, not counting the elder Mr. Innes' time in typesetting.

Bill maintains that had it not been for the existence of the small Innes printing shop, enabling him to become his own publisher, he would never have been heard of as an author of aquarium books, for there was little public interest in the subject. What few books there were had ended "in the red." Not one went into a second edition.

Bill eventually became secretary, president, and, finally, board member of The Aquarium Society of Philadelphia. In 1912 he was really the principal mover in starting the first American aquarium magazine. It was called THE AQUARIUM and was published jointly by the New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Chicago societies. It had the approval of the then-great names in American aquarium-keeping, Eugene Smith, Dr. Ernst Bade, and Hugo Muellert. It lasted less than two years, for, as Bill says, it was impossible to get the different societies to send in their material on time, and "volunteer help always gets tired in the back."

In those days, goldfish were the important aquarium fishes and the goldfish breeders of Philadelphia led the world in the development, improvement, origination and standardization of the fancy breeds, exceeding even the Oriental breeders in many ways. Like many of us who got our start in the old days, Bill was a "fancy goldfish man" and, I suspect, still is at heart. It is interesting, therefore, that his growing interest in tropicals was viewed as heresy by the goldfish breeders, and

that his attempt to interest Philadelphia aquarists in tropicals did much to burst asunder the Philadelphia group.

Tropical fishes did not get well started in this country until about 1912, and then principally in New York. Dr. Bade, Isaac Buchanan and Richard Dorn of New York were the leaders, the two latter and Walter L. Brind having brought in the first big importations—mostly from Germany before World War I. Breeders and hobbyists in the metropolitan New York area, such as Obermuller, Holbein, Lowell, Rabenau, and Heede spread the word and the stock during and after the war. Bill induced Buchanan to come to Philadelphia to give a talk on tropicals. This beginning, plus Bill's first book (1917), plus the quick rise of tropicals, convinced some of the Philadelphia goldfish men that Bill had hatched a plot to run goldfish off the map. And it resulted in five different Philadelphia societies, none really strong enough to stand alone.

Bill began to see that a new book was badly needed. Wolf would not agree to co-authorship of a revised edition of his book, so Innes & Sons bought out his rights, and Bill got out the first edition of *Goldfish Varieties and Tropical Aquarium Fishes* in 1917. It gradually climbed into the best-seller class, aquaristically speaking, and by 1932 had reached its 32nd edition. Incidentally, my own collaboration in the tropical part began with the third edition, in 1926.

Many older aquarists will remember the great annual aquarium shows held in Horticultural Hall in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, by the Philadelphia societies. The finest fancy goldfish in the world were exhibited at these shows in the 1920's. Bill selected this site for the shows and made many of the arrangements. And it was on my own

first trip to Philadelphia (I think it was in 1923) to see one of these shows that I first met Bill.

Aquarium keeping and the tropical fish hobby grew mightily during the 1920's, but did not hit their stride until the great depression. Bill lost heavily in the stock crash of 1929, but the tropical fish hobby was affected very strangely. As the economic indexes dropped, tropical fish keeping rose to heights that seemed dizzy to the old timers. No one has properly explained it to this day. I suspect it was due primarily to two things—a desire to become absorbed in a hobby and forget monetary troubles and the hope of making a few dollars by breeding fishes. In any event, the hobby grew so fast that Bill began to think about starting a magazine and writing a tropical book. We had considerable correspondence about both.

THE AQUARIUM was launched in 1932. Bill included my name in the masthead, and it has stayed there ever since. But I never gave anything but advice and articles. The whole idea and its execution were Bill's. Above all, a magazine like this needs good photographs, and here Bill's photographic experience weighed heavily. He had used a few of his photos in his first book, but not many. In THE AQUARIUM, Bill "went to town", photographically speaking. It was hard work. Fish won't pose. Often one must work for hours to get a single good negative. Good fish photographers have always been notably scarce. But Bill produced hundreds of first-class portraits of *pairs* of fishes—a job that more than doubles the trouble of the photographer. Only recently has another fish photographer appeared (Timmerman of Holland) who can regularly produce quantities of first class photos of pairs of tropical fishes. Bill was the pioneer and his

place at the top of all fish photographers is secure.

Not only that. Bill decided to use color photos in the cover of the magazine, at a time when color photographs of fishes were a great novelty. Many of those he has used in THE AQUARIUM have been highly retouched, but this has been done in a wonderfully careful way—so much so that "Innes plates" have served as a world standard and as a source of information (and plagiarism) unequalled in any field known to me. This in itself is a major accomplishment.

Nor have photos been the only feature of the magazine worthy of mention. THE AQUARIUM has become the world's best known periodical on fishes. Bill's long experience has given him a most remarkable insight, not only into aquarium keeping and the ways of aquarium fishes—but also into the mind and problems of the average aquarist. The magazine, and Bill's books, have both been guided by that experience and that insight. They have taught the art of keeping and breeding fishes to two generations of aquarium hobbyists, and done it well.

Exotic Aquarium Fishes, Bill's book-of-books, appeared in 1935. Nothing like it had ever been seen. The excellent photos, the wonderful color plates, the variety of fishes covered, and the plain, clear, down-to-earth writing about keeping and breeding them were a revelation to aquarists of the day. It leaped into instant popularity. Now that the book is so well known, a few inevitable detractors have appeared. For their benefit it can be said that *Exotic* was never intended to be a complete manual of Tropicals. There are too many for any book to be "complete." Bill included the readily available or best known species of the day and omitted lots of others. There have been many

additions and some deletions in subsequent editions. Moreover, the book is written especially for the average reader, for whom Bill has respect and consideration. The information wanted by the aquarium public has been included, and all else dismissed. It is a rare writer who can do this. The public has shown its appreciation by buying out sixteen editions of the book!

The same care in gauging the public's needs had marked Bill's other books, two of which have perhaps had a greater impact on the hobby than the big volume. Realizing the need for a first-class, cheaper guide to aquarium keeping, a "dollar book", *The Modern Aquarium*, was published in 1929. A still cheaper, twenty-five cent booklet, *Your Aquarium*, was published in 1945. Hundreds of thousands of beginners have been "started out right" by these small books. His old goldfish book, rejuvenated and transformed into the best of all guides to pond-keeping and water gardening still goes merrily on.

Today, William T. Innes, stands at the very top of the millions of aquarium enthusiasts—The best known and most respected aquarist and authority on aquariums in the world. His books, his photographs and his influence on this field have educated millions. More than any other one man, he has forwarded and popularized one of the most instructive and rewarding hobbies. Small wonder, then, that Temple University conferred the Doctorate of Humane Letters on Bill in 1951. For years his letters to me were addressed to "Ole Doc Myers"—or just "O.D.M." now we can call *him* Doc!

I've said a lot about Bill's aquarium career. Now I want to say a little about his personal life and more on Bill himself.

Bill's lifelong helpmate, Mary, passed away in 1950 six months after

their golden wedding anniversary. All of us who knew her were shocked and grieved, for she was one of those people of whom you meet but one in a lifetime. They were married in 1899 and they had four pretty daughters, all now with families of their own.

Bill Innes himself is not just a fine printer and a publisher and a respected businessman and an extraordinary photographer and a very successful author and a remarkable water-gardener and a world renowned authority on gold and tropical fishes and the greatest aquarist in the world. Not by a long sight! He is the most keenly alive and alert and the most interesting and most interested man I have ever known. Few general topics in this world have not been touched upon in our thirty-years correspondence and not one but has been enlightened in a far-seeing but quite down-to-earth and original way by Bill's comments. He understands people, and with this understanding is mixed tolerance and good will and kindness. Yet Bill has his hard facts. He has no use for deceit and dishonesty, and he is remarkably acute in spotting them. He is an excellent judge of people.

Finally Bill himself is one of the least assuming of men. He has never pretended to be a scientific authority of this or that, as many in his position might have a tendency to do. He is still a learner in the aquarium and fish game (as are all great men in their own lines) and any other attitude would be quite foreign to him. And this unassuming quality, together with his real interest in his fellow men, make Bill Innes the finest friend a man could have.

Bill's birthday is February 2nd. So is mine. As one groundhog to another, I say, "Happy Birthday, Bill! And many, many more of them."



Photo by Alan M. Fletcher