

## OBITUARY

### HERMANN MERXMÜLLER (1920–1988)

In the early hours of the morning of the 8th of February 1988 Prof. Dr Hermann Merxmüller passed away in the Polyclinic of the University of Munich after a long serious illness. He was at the time emeritus professor of systematic botany of the University of Munich as well as ex-director of the Botanic Garden of Munich and the Botanische Staatssammlung (State Herbarium), Munich. On his retirement he had thus combined under his control the entire research field of systematic botany in Munich.

Hermann Merxmüller (Figure 1) was born in Munich on the 30th of August 1920, the son of a teacher. The family had been resident in Bavaria for many generations. His interest in the diversity of the plant world developed very early and even as a pupil he was a keen plant collector in the surroundings of Munich and in the Bavarian mountains. Sympathetic teachers helped promote these talents appreciably and at the age of 17 he became Member of the Bavarian Botanical Society in which he soon drew attention through his floristic knowledge which, even at that stage, was remarkable. After completion of his schooling at the renowned Ludwigs Gymnasium in Munich the 2nd World War broke out which temporarily made the study of biology impossible, and during the ensuing six years allowed little time for botany. Only after the war could Merxmüller take up a scholarship of the distinguished Maximilianeums Foundation which provided free study to highly gifted persons.

In 1946 circumstances at last allowed him to commence the study of biology at the University of Munich, which he completed in a remarkably short time in 1951 with a doctoral dissertation for which he was awarded the highest mark, *summa cum laude*. His dissertation dealt with problems of plant distribution in the Alps and soon earned him high esteem in scientific circles. Since 1948 he had close ties with the Botanische Staatssammlung, which at the time was under the directorship of Karl Suessenguth, and shortly after his graduation he took up a position as scientific assistant at this institute. It was Suessenguth, who directed Merxmüller's sights towards Africa, because he had decided relatively late in life to work on the flora of South West Africa in Munich and to compile a Prodrömus for the region. This new goal of the Botanische Staatssammlung soon resulted in Merxmüller's involvement in southern African plant groups. His early interest in complex genera led him to study the European tribes of *Hieracium*. Very soon he extended this interest to the whole family Compositae. His first publication dealing with southern African groups was his *Compositenstudien I* (1950) which was a treatise on the Compositae of the collections by Rehm from South West Africa, Transvaal and the Cape Province. During the following year a joint publication with his teacher Suessenguth appeared entitled 'A contribution to the flora of the Marandellas District, Southern Rhodesia'. It was the first joint 'finger-warming exercise' for the Prodrömus einer Flora von Südwestafrika. This prelude led to a long series of works on the flora of southern

Africa which ended only with his *Compositen-Studien XI* (1984) in which all then known changes in the Compositae treatment of the Prodrömus are dealt with. This central theme of Merxmüller's research work also comes to the fore in the second opus of his scientific career, his inaugural dissertation, an exacting treatise which has to be approved before admission can be gained to the teaching staff of a German university. To this end Merxmüller presented a revision of *Geigeria*, a southern African genus of the Compositae.

The relatively early death of Suessenguth brought with it several significant changes for Hermann Merxmüller. He was appointed as head of the Botanische Staatssammlung, and he not only considered it his duty but it was with genuine scientific interest that he assumed responsibility for the huge project of the 'Prodrömus einer Flora von Südwestafrika'. With his characteristic energy he succeeded in publishing this fundamental overview in the course of six years (1966–1972). Several journeys to South Africa and especially South West Africa (1957/58, 1963, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1977) enabled him to gain valuable first-hand knowledge of the plant world of the region which became very dear to him (Figure 2). The rich plant collections with which he returned to Munich from these journeys formed the basis of many of his works and led to numerous investigations into the



FIGURE 1.—Hermann Merxmüller (1920–1988).

southern Africa flora by his collaborators. Even the first journey resulted in the acquaintance and friendship of many colleagues, links which lasted until his last days and which gave vital support to the progress of his scientific endeavours.

In Munich he succeeded in founding the Institut für Systematische Botanik at the University in 1958 and he became its first director. Previously he had been offered chairs of systematic botany at the renowned faculties of Berlin and Zürich. In the following years Merxmüller succeeded in purposefully promoting systematic research in Munich and in a short time this city had become an important centre for plant systematic research in central Europe. His cosmopolitan outlook and his high scientific repute soon led to a rapid increase in the international contacts of the institute and the collections grew considerably. Hermann Merxmüller was among those instrumental in aiding German botany to break out of its isolation after the war and in establishing new or re-establishing old contacts world-wide.

In addition to his research work Hermann Merxmüller was also an eminent lecturer. His lucid, well considered and precise delivery was highly esteemed by his students and colleagues alike and he helped to give form and content to numerous national and international congresses. In the University of Munich he was a valued member of many important panels. From 1963 to 1965 he was Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and from 1963 to 1968 a member of the Senate. In 1969 he decided to assume in addition the directorship of the Botanic Garden. Although he would probably rather have devoted his

talents to science than to bureaucracy he saw the need for incorporating the botanic garden in the group of three institutes in Munich devoted to systematic botany. In the following year he could thus welcome many guests from all corners of the earth at the 7th congress of AETFAT as host of three houses. It gave him great pleasure to organize this congress which focussed on the heart of his scientific interest, the African flora.

At this time of his most active scientific endeavour the two most prominent characteristics of Merxmüller were particularly well defined: his ability to recall almost every plant he had ever seen and his faculty for scientific synthesis, which, combined with his vast knowledge of literature, resulted in an extraordinary insight into correlations in the plant kingdom. Unfortunately he was not granted the opportunity to shape this knowledge into a lasting work for which he had drawn up plans. Only the recollections of many lectures, conversations and discussions therefore remain.

Hermann Merxmüller has been honoured often and in various ways for his scientific achievements. Only the following will be singled out in the present context: the Bavarian Order of Merit (1983), the Jubilee Medal of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa (1963) and the Special Award of the South African Association of Botanists (1982). Hermann Merxmüller was member of numerous scientific societies and of several academies.

Since 1980 he suffered increasingly from chronic ailments. He therefore decided in 1985 to relinquish his positions at the University, in the State Herbarium and



FIGURE 2.—Prof. H. Merxmüller in Sperrgebiet No. 1, SWA/Namibia, flats west of Buntfeldschuh, with a specimen of *Othonna furcata* (Lindl.) Druce in full flower, 1972.09.12. Photo: W. Giess.

in the Garden. Relieved of the burden of these positions he had hoped to devote his remaining strength exclusively to botany. But unfortunately these hopes were not to be fulfilled. Every visit to the hospital during the last three years increasingly reduced his strength. Finally he even had to experience the loss of most of his eyesight, his most crucial contact with the world. To us who had to observe this development, it appeared to be a particularly cruel fate.

Southern African botany has lost in Hermann Merxmüller a scientist who has in the course of the past 25 years made significant contributions to its furtherance. He was always a true friend of this region to which he was emotionally strongly attached, an attachment that lasted unflinchingly till the very end.

*Selected literature on southern Africa*

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