

OBITUARY

CYTHNA LINDENBERG LETTY (1895-1985)

With the death of Cythna Letty (Mrs. Forssman) (Fig. 1) in Pretoria at the age of 90 on 3 May 1985, the career of one of South Africa's most distinguished and prolific botanical artists came to an end. She was born in Standerton, Transvaal, on 1 January 1895, the first of five children of the marriage between Walter Edward Letty of Greenwich, England, and Josina Christina Lindenberg of Worcester, Cape Province, who had previously borne six children during her earlier marriage to David Johannes de Vaal Leibbrandt. Figs 2 & 3.



FIG. 1. — Cythna Lindenberg Letty (Mrs Forssman), c. 1945.



FIG. 2. — Cythna with her mother and father, Johannesburg 1886.

In 1899 the family moved to Estcourt in northern Natal where Cythna attended her first of 13 schools and, in 1904, back to Standerton. The delicate and fleeting wild flowers of the veld had fascinated Cythna from her early childhood and it was during her second stay at Standerton that her mother, an able and talented woman, gave Cythna and her younger sister their first lessons in watercolour painting. In 1910 they moved to Heidelberg, Transvaal, where her mother completed a second volume of wild flower paintings. Included are several species which at that time were new to science.

In 1914 Cythna spent her last year of schooling at the Girl's High School, Pretoria, after which she worked as a governess for a short time on the farm Kameeldrift, north-east of Pretoria. One of the paintings she made here, in 1915, is reproduced in Fig. 4. She then trained as a nurse for a year (qualifying as a mid-wife) and as a clerk with the Railways before moving to Cape Town from 1920 to 1924 to assist her brother-in-law, Dr Bösenberg.

Returning to Pretoria in 1925 she received her first appointment in which she could exercise her artistic talent, at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Laboratories. This was before the time of colour photography and she was required to record, for future reference, the appearance of *post mortem* specimens typical of various animal diseases and abnormalities. 'Interesting, if gory, work', she recalls. 'Once, while I was busy drawing an opened-up carcass of a sheep, Dr. Gilles de Kock hurried in with a large bottle of disinfectant to counteract the stench, expecting to find me in a dead faint.'

In 1927 she was transferred to the then Division of Plant Industry under Dr. I. B. Pole Evans where, in the National Herbarium, she started to contribute her superb paintings of African plants which, for many years were the mainstay of the journal *Flowering Plants of Africa*. Some years later Dr. George H. M. Lawrence, director of the then Rachel Mc-Masters Miller Hunt Botanical Library at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, USA, commented: 'It is



FIG. 3. — Cythna standing at extreme right, front row, with her family, Estcourt 1900.

clear that she stands with the very few among the world's top botanical artists.'

She resigned in 1938 to marry Oscar William Alric Forssman whose grandfather, Chevalier Oscar Wil-

helm Alric Forssman had come from Sweden to South Africa in 1844. One son, Bruce, was born in 1940. In 1945 she returned to her post in the National Herbarium and continued working until her final retirement in 1968. During her service she completed over 740 plates for *Flowering Plants of Africa* as well as contributing paintings and black and white illustrations to several other publications of the BRI: *Botanical Survey Memoir No. 26 (Trees and Shrubs of the Kruger National Park)*, *Weeds of South Africa* and the Institute's journal *Bothalia*. In 1962 one of her great ambitions was realised when her book *Wild Flowers of the Transvaal* appeared, with 145 plates in colour and the text written partly by herself but largely by other staff members of the BRI. The translation by her cousin Anna Rothman, *Veldblomme van Transvaal*, was the first major illustrated botanical work to appear in Afrikaans.



FIG. 4. — An early study of a Transvaal orchid by Cythna in 1915.



FIG. 5. — A preliminary design for the 50c coin.



FIG. 6. — Cythna Letty, 1978.

When South Africa changed to the decimal system it was decided that the coinage would depict indigenous birds, animals and plants. Cythna was asked to submit several floral motifs and her designs for the 50c (*Strelitzia*, *Zantedeschia* and *Agapanthus*, representing the orange, white and blue of the South African flag), 20c (*Protea cynaroides* and *P. repens*) and 10c (*Aloe aculeata*) were accepted (Fig. 5). Minting began in December 1964 and the coins were first released in 1965. About the same time she also drew the design of *Gloriosa virescens* for the Rhodesian sixpence, which was minted in 1964.

After her retirement she undertook a revision of *Zantedeschia*, a genus in which she had been interested for many years and for which she had assembled the necessary background information. It was published in *Bothalia* 11: 5–26 (1973), freely illustrated with her own inimitable paintings. Commissions for her paintings, which were then in great demand, kept her occupied but she found time to prepare a number of drawings of indigenous trees which were published in two small books, *Trees of South Africa* in 1975 and *More Trees of South Africa* in 1980.

A project which had been in the back of her mind for some years materialised in her 86th year when 23 paintings of what she called 'strange little flowers'

appeared, together with a selection of her poetry which she had jotted down over the years, under the title *Children of the Hours* (1981). Professor Ridley Beeton of the University of South Africa, in an introduction to the book, commented on her 'desire to use words to say things not beyond what she said in her paintings but to explore new routes to perception.' She once said in an interview with a reporter that poetry had been an extension of her paintings, 'I could put only part of my love for flowers into my drawings.'

Volume 30 (1945) of *Flowering Plants of Africa* was dedicated to her 'in grateful recognition of her signal service to South African botany and the art of botanical illustration', but general acknowledgement of her merit came to her only late in life. In 1966 she visited Europe and the United States for the first time when some of her paintings were included in an international exhibition of botanical art held at the Hunt Botanical Institute, Pittsburgh. She repeated the visit in 1970 when she received the Grenfell Silver Medal from the Royal Horticultural Society for an exhibit in London of her paintings of Transvaal wild flowers. In 1974 the University of the Witwatersrand bestowed on her an honorary LL.D. degree in appreciation of 'a lifetime devoted to superb craftsmanship that has assisted our scientific advance

and given joy to so many here and abroad'. In the same year the Johannesburg newspaper *The Star* named her 'Woman of the Year'. She was made a fellow of the American Cactus Society in 1978 and, in 1981, the South African Association of Botanists awarded her their Certificate of Merit for her contributions towards the advancement of botany in South Africa.

She collected about 500 herbarium specimens, including some of the earliest to be recorded from the Kruger National Park during a visit at the invitation of the then Warden, Col. Stevenson Hamilton. Her name is commemorated in the botanical names *Aloe lettyae* Reynolds and *Crassula lettyae* Phillips and in the Cythna Letty Nature Reserve in the mountains near Barberton. Although physically frail in the last

years of her life her spirit was unquenchable and, even in her last few months, she was planning for the future, including exploratory enquiries regarding the possibility of reproducing the two volumes of her mother's paintings. Perhaps her life is epitomised in her verse:

I hitched my wagon to a daisy
Direction vague and destination hazy
But,
Could any star have guided
me
more exactly
to where I most dearly loved to be?

L.E. CODD