

Edwin Percy Phillips, M.A., D.Sc. (1884-1967)

by

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Edwin Percy Phillips, who was Chief of the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology, Pretoria (the present Botanical Research Institute), from 1939 to 1944, died in Cape Town on 12th April, 1967. The son of Ralph Edward Phillips, a Cape Town businessman, and Edith Minnie Phillips, née Crowder, he was born on 18th February, 1884, at York House, Hall Street, Sea Point. There were nine children in the family, five sons and four daughters. His grandfather, Samuel Phillips, was a well-known merchant and owned the fine property "Bellwood House", with its adjoining estate, below Lions Head, Sea Point, in the early 1870's.

After attending the South African College School he entered the South African College (later to become the University of Cape Town), where he came under the stimulating influence of the inspired teacher and botanist, Prof. H. H. W. Pearson. In 1905 he obtained the B.A. degree with first class honours in botany and, in 1908, his M.A.

In 1907 he was appointed as assistant in the herbarium of the South African Museum, of which Prof. Pearson was then Honorary Curator, and applied himself with vigour to studying and collecting the local flora. The result was that, in 1910, he was granted ten months leave of absence by the Trustees of the Museum, to proceed to the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Here he dealt with the family Proteaceae, a group of which he had first hand field knowledge, in collaboration with the Kew botanists Otto Stapf and John Hutchinson for the "Flora Capensis".

When Prof. Pearson resigned as honorary curator of the S.A. Museum herbarium in 1911 to become custodian of the Bolus Herbarium at the South African College, E. P. Phillips was appointed as assistant in charge of the Museum herbarium.

In 1912 he married Edith Isabel Dawson of Sea Point. The union was to prove a happy one. Two daughters were born of the marriage and he was always a devoted husband and father.

On his return to South Africa he worked for some years on collections sent in by Mme. A. Dieterlen, wife of a French missionary stationed at Leribe in northern Lesotho. In order to gain a better knowledge of the flora *in situ* he visited the territory in 1913. His field studies, together with the taxonomic work entailed, resulted in a paper entitled "A contribution to the flora of the Leribe Plateau and environs: with a discussion on the relationships of the flora of Basutoland, the Kalahari, and the south-eastern regions", for which he was awarded the degree of D.Sc. by the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1915.

His collecting localities were mainly in the western Cape where, as a keen mountaineer and member of the Cape Mountain Club (of which he was for some time Secretary), he actively explored and collected in the rich flora of the Cape mountains. Dr. Phillips was a member of the Percy Staden Memorial Expedition, which explored the Kamiesburg, Gifberg and Olifants River mountains during September 1911.

In May, 1918, Dr. Phillips joined the Government Service as Curator of the National Herbarium of the Division of Botany, a section of the Department of Agriculture, Pretoria. At that time the herbarium was a relatively small one, started in 1903 by Joseph Burt Davy and, on his retirement in 1913, incorporated with the Plant Pathology Section into the Division of Botany under Dr. I. B. Pole Evans.

When Dr. Phillips took charge of the National Herbarium, a Botanical Survey of the Union of South Africa was being conducted and this led to the rapid growth of the Herbarium which was also supplemented by donations of important private collections. Shortly after his appointment, three scientific publications were started by the Division. The first of these was the series of Botanical Survey Memoirs, which appeared initially in 1919 and of which he was author of Memoirs 9, 10 and 25. He was responsible for the major part of the text in the first 20 volumes of the illustrated serial, *The Flowering Plants of South Africa*, issued in 1920. *Bothalia*, a record of the contributions from the National Herbarium, Pretoria, appeared in 1921, and was the venue for many of his botanical papers.

During twenty-one years as botanist, and Chief from 1939–1944 of the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology, he published some 200 scientific papers and several major works, including “*The Genera of South African Flowering Plants*”, “*South African Grasses*”, “*The Weeds of South Africa*” and after his retirement he was re-employed to complete a second edition of the “*Genera*”. His last contribution to South African botany was spontaneously and gratuitously given as a tribute to a former friend and colleague, C. A. Smith, when he undertook the gigantic task of editing “*Common Names of South African Plants*”.

His activities on behalf of science were not entirely confined to botany: he was Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa and of the Linnean Society of London, a Member of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science and the South African Biological Society. He served on the Council of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science for many years and was an efficient secretary and recorder of numerous congresses; in 1930 he was President of Section C and delivered an address entitled “*The development of botanical science in South Africa*”.

In 1935 he was awarded the South Africa Medal and Grant by the Council of the Association, becoming President in 1942; his address on this occasion was “*The advancement of science*”. He was an active member of the South African Biological Society holding the position of Honorary Secretary for a record period of 25 years, being elected President and awarded the Senior Captain Scott Medal in 1925.

When the centenary meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science took place in London in 1931, he was one of the delegates chosen to represent South Africa. He visited the U.S.A. and Canada in 1934 under the Visitors' Grant Committee of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. A Report on his visit, “*Herbaria and botanical institutions in the United States of America and Canada in relation to similar institutions in South Africa*”, was published in the *South African Biological Pamphlet* 8, 1935.

“*Life and Living, A Story for Children*”. This small book published in 1933 was for the teaching of biology in schools.

Apart from his official and scientific interests, he devoted time to the welfare of the Public Service and the Public Servants Association in particular. He became a member of the Executive Committee of the Association in 1920 and served continuously until 1944, when he was appointed Research Officer to the Public Service Commission. He was Chairman of the Public Servants Association from

1935–36, and President from 1936–38, and Chairman of the Committee appointed by the Public Service Commission to investigate a medical benefit scheme for public servants. In local affairs he was a member and later Chairman of the Pretoria Technical College for many years, and in 1940 was President of the Association of Technical Colleges.

In 1946 he was appointed Scientific Liaison Officer for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and stationed at Washington, D.C. Shortly before his return to South Africa in 1948 he sustained the loss of his wife.

As recreation, when nearing his fifties, he joined a local Bowling Club, became President and had the rare distinction of honorary life membership in recognition of his services to the Club.

He married again in 1949, his second wife being Miss Susan Kriel of Pretoria with whom he had worked for many years in the interests of the Public Service. In 1950 he commemorated her name in the Composite genus *Susanna*. She predeceased him in 1965. He spent his remaining days in the home of his younger married daughter in Cape Town. His health rapidly deteriorated and he suffered several slight strokes before his death.

All his long life he had enjoyed good health and had a great capacity for work without fatigue. He had been associated with Dr. Marloth in his early days at the Cape and also later when Marloth was a committee member of the Botanical Survey. He wrote two years before his death: "I owe much to Marloth. He was a tireless worker and one day he said to me: Phillips, if you want to succeed in science, you must work twenty-four hours a day". Marloth's words must have stimulated him throughout his working days. E. P. Phillips was conscientious, methodical and all his dealings had the stamp of integrity.