

OBITUARY

MICHAEL JOHN WELLS (1935–2010)

I come from the land of the Zulus
Where the countrymen are dark
They shout their news from the hilltops
Twang their guitars and laugh!
And the laughter of the Zulu
Is a chuckling belly-laugh.

This is the first verse of *The Countryman's Salute*, one of his many poems which is chosen here to frame a picture of Michael John Wells (Figure 1)—botanist, artist, organizer, gardener, humanitarian.

But when he meets you and greets you
It's a serious affair
Where brother acknowledges brother
And measures his mind with care.
For the eye of the Zulu is darker
And his thoughts more simple and plain
Than the calm that promises peace,
—in the eye of a hurricane!

Michael John Wells was born in the capital of God's Own Country (Pietermaritzburg in what is now known as KwaZulu-Natal) on the 23rd of October 1935. His father was a teacher, later a lecturer at the Teacher's Training College in Pietermaritzburg. He kindled in Michael an interest in and a love for nature which was



FIGURE 1.—Michael John Wells (1935–2010).

to guide him in the direction of biology. In 1952 he matriculated in his home town with Art and Technical Drawing as subjects. The following year he enrolled at the University of Natal for a B.Sc. course with Zoology and Botany as majors. At first he tended towards Zoology, in view of his interest in and knowledge of butterflies which had brought him in contact with the lepidopterist K.M. Pennington for whom he collected specimens. An article on a butterfly and its host plant (Wells 1958) and a review of *Pennington's butterflies* (Wells 1980) are visible results of this interest. Mike much later undertook a study of lepidoptera during a visit to Madagascar. Under the guidance of Prof. Adolf Bayer he moved in the direction of Botany and completed his B.Sc.(Hons) in 1956. During 1957–1958 he undertook an ecological survey of the Ngeni Valley on the topic: *An account of the plant ecology of the Nagle Dam area of Natal*.

Michael applied for a post at the Botanical Research Institute on 28 October 1956 and assumed duty as Temporary Assistant Professional Officer at the University of Natal on 21 November 1956, pending permanent employment. His testimonials stressed 'power of concentration and the capability to work hard', as well as his 'ability to speak Afrikaans fluently enough to cope with conversation on assorted everyday topics as well as his work'. He was appointed to the Botanical Survey Section of the Institute in 1957 with the brief to complete his M.Sc. thesis and to write it up for publication. His mode of transport during field work periods was a privately owned motorbike (a BSA 4-stroke; mileage subsidized); his *in situ* accommodation: a tent, graduating to a shack 9' × 9' (3 × 3 m).

So it was that I learnt to greet him
In the veld as we passed by,
By slowly raising a hand in salute
To the level of my eye.
A silent, unspoken greeting
That says 'I see you there.'
No more, no less
—not 'friend' or 'stranger'
—not 'welcome' or 'go away'
But the hope of the world
In the sight of God,
I may need your help one day!

Michael was a perfectionist, and this could lead to non-fulfilment because he was loathe to publish until he was absolutely certain he could not make any further additions or improvements. Therefore he received his M.Sc. only in 1963 and the thesis was not formally published. Between 1960 and 1964 he undertook vegetation surveys requested by the Transvaal Provincial Administration. They covered the Loskop Dam Nature Reserve, the Abel Erasmus Pass area and the Jack Scott Nature Reserve and were published in the Administration's journal *Fauna & Flora* (Wells 1960, 1964; Wells & Strey 1961).

In 1961 he was transferred to the Institute's Research Unit at the Albany Museum in the City of Saints and Sinners, Grahamstown, where he was Officer in Charge until 1968. Not long after his transfer he advised his Head Office of an impending change of status, which came about on 30 September of that year when he married Estelle, née Rossouw, in Pretoria, a marriage destined to enrich this world by one son and two daughters: Michelle (1962), Stephen (1965) and Yvette (1967). His colleagues in Grahamstown included Estelle Brink who was also in the employ of the Institute; Amy Jacot Guillarmod, Senior Lecturer in Botany at Rhodes University; Prof. Stanley Seagrief, marine algologist at the same university; Hilary Deacon, archaeologist at the Albany Museum, later professor at Stellenbosch and his wife Janette; and Grace Britten, botanical assistant at the Albany Museum since 1922.

In his book *Human beginnings in South Africa*, published in 1999, Prof. Deacon writes: 'We were fortunate that the herbarium of the Botanical Research Institute was housed at the Albany Museum because it brought us into contact with the botanist Michael Wells. He was amazed to discover that some of the plant fragments from Scott's Cave (Wells 1965) were better preserved than the scientifically preserved specimens of much lesser antiquity in the herbarium. His meticulous identifications and analysis pioneered the study of archaeological plant remains'.

Michael often talked enthusiastically about the Hogsback and its forests, a mountainous region some 100 km northeast of Grahamstown, as the crow flies; the car will find it a lot farther. He and the family visited the area often, and his interest in the Hogsback and its people and industries can be well sensed in his article on the wagon-building industry (Figure 2) of the region (Wells 1973a).

When the impassioned, committed life of the indefatigable Amy Jacot Guillarmod had come to an end, Michael and Estelle Brink honoured her with a fitting farewell published in *Bothalia* 22 (Wells & Brink 1992).

In 1968 he was transferred to Pretoria and in 1969 took charge of the newly formed Economic Botany Section.

Now that I've left my homeland
And travelled—continents away
Where languages are different
And the people's eyes are grey
Clouded with suspicion
Indifferently staring away
I've found that the only greeting
That reaches to man the brute
Is the one that I've learnt from the Zulu
—the countryman's salute!

The new position enabled Mike to undertake an extensive tour of the USA and England. The tour report: *Economic Botany—aims, functions and priorities* (compiled in 1971), contains a wealth of information with special emphasis on new crop research. His work on economically important plants focused attention on problem plants, especially the introduced weeds. He made a major contribution to weed science in South Africa and in particular did much to create awareness of invasive plants. This led to a globe-encompassing study tour of *Nassella* (Figure 3), the invasive South American grass to which Mike drew wide attention with a forcefully conducted anti-publicity campaign.

Lesley Henderson, a leading figure in southern African weed research, relates that Mike introduced her to invasive alien plants (IAPs) and that it was his mentorship and inspiration that led to the development of roadside survey techniques for recording IAPs which ultimately culminated in the Southern African Plant Invaders Atlas (SAPIA) project. Michael was a founder member and a major driving force in the Southern African Weed Science Society (SAWSS) and served as its president for two terms: from 1988–1989 and 1993–1994.

He had the gift of the pen and used it to teach his staff how to write scientific papers. A draft paper would be returned to the author with numerous inserts, re-arrangements and corrections. In those days without computers,



FIGURE 2.—An example of a wagon built at Keiskammahoek by Robert Ballantine & Co. which was active from 1928–1964.



FIGURE 3.—*Nassella* tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*) invasion at Hogsback, Eastern Cape. Photograph: M.J. Wells, 1980.

it entailed cutting and pasting with scissors and glue. Mike was very particular about spelling, punctuation and correct grammar.

Creation was preceded by chaos: his office bulged with books, boxes and publications and had the atmosphere of a museum store room. When it had reached saturation point he took over another office that had been vacated. The overflow from this office landed up in one of the herbarium wings.

The weightiest (2.162 kg) of his publications is *A catalogue of problem plants in southern Africa* (Wells *et al.* 1986). His colleagues recall that proofreading of this book went on forever. It was laid out in one of the herbarium wings and all members of his staff took an hour or so a day to do a few pages. The co-authors of this book, all members of his staff, were A.A. (Aurelio) Bal-sinhas (Figure 4), H. (Pitte) Joffe, V.M. (Vicky) Engelbrecht, G. (Graham) Harding, & C.H. Stirton (Charlie, now Prof.). During the discussion at Head Office of a merit assessment that Mike had written about Charlie Stirton, the length of the list of publications and the level of praise assigned were such that some committee members were dumbfounded, others laughed admiringly, yet others were proposing a class 1++. Michael was later instrumental in re-appointing Denise Fourie to the Economic Botany Section, and in organizing a contract for Prof. emeritus Douw Steyn, to work on poisonous plants.

Michael was well known for his oral presentations and taught his staff to always be well prepared and rehearsed, to have good visual aids and to have a small torch handy in case it was needed. His talks always started and ended with a statement or photo with impact and there was always room for humour.

Several colleagues remember Mike's photographic sessions as highlights of the working calendar. These meetings were originally instituted for the benefit of members of his Economic Botany section but were eventually attended by members of several other sections because they were so enjoyable and instructive.

Anybody could submit slides for viewing and constructive criticism. A well-known result of these sessions are the gardening books by Pitta Joffe. As one of Mike's staff members, she progressed in the field of plant photography from ignoramus to expert. Other people's meetings he often found deadly boring—the result: frame-worthy bedoodled minutes!

A look at Mike's collection of slides was a treat: plants of all descriptions and provenance richly interspersed with cartoons from all manner of publications. His sense of humour, which found audible expression in the form of Zulu-style chuckles rather than lusty laughter, found particularly verdant pastures in the adventures of Hägar the Horrible, as is well documented in the card that Estelle sent to family and friends after Michael's death (Figure 5).

Members of the Institute and their spouses who had small children at the time have fond memories of Michael in the role of Father Christmas, five years running. At the end of the fifth year a note appeared in an Institute newsletter under the heading:

A pleasantly mature executive retires:

Even in adult childhood, one does not expect Father Christmas to apply for early retirement. But at the end of 1992 this happened to us in Pretoria. Mike, we appreciate all you gave to the role, especially your willingness to arrive on tractors and motorbikes, ring bells and shoulder a bulging bag or two. Remember the day you even had to mind the rain, dear? Or was it reindeer? It was not an easy position to fill. In a recent recruiting advertisement the requirements were set out as follows: Applicants must be mature, well spoken, multilingual, very friendly, understanding and, ideally, have numerous grandchildren whom they will have learned to understand and also to communicate well with. In addition, they should, in view of the climate, carry a fair amount of extra weight, prefer their hair worn long and, ideally, again because of the climate, wear a healthy beard. Their maturity should be reflected in the silver whiteness of their hair. Applicants who have some knowledge of the dietary requirements of reindeer would be preferred,



FIGURE 4.—General staff meeting of the Botanical Research Institute held at Pretoria in August 1983. Mike Wells is seated in the front row on the extreme right.

and a code 08 sleigh licence is essential. (Authors: Gill Condry & René Glen). Michael fitted these requirements, apart from the knowledge of reindeer fodder (or did he have that as well?) and the sleigh licence, almost to a T.

In Loving Memory of our

“HÄGAR”

Michael John Wells

1935-10-23 to 2010-05-27



FIGURE 5.—The card that Estelle sent to family and friends after Michael's death.

Michael was a great organizer. He was instrumental in planning, motivating for and implementing a massive fire security and air-condition system for the building. As far as I can remember his detailed and well-constructed motivation readily convinced the powers that be that the considerable funds required for such a scheme were wisely spent. He played a major role in organizing events such as the festivities surrounding the move to the new building in the Botanical Garden in Brummeria in 1973. For the occasion he published a brochure entitled *Under one roof/Onder een dak* (Wells 1973c). In 1978 the BRI celebrated its 75th anniversary, and here again Mike played an important part in the preparations for the occasion. Amongst others he gave a talk: 'The rôle of economic botany in the development of South Africa' (Wells 1979). Another aspect of Michael's involvement in this grand occasion can be illustrated by a picture of him chatting to the Minister of Agriculture, Hendrik Schoeman (Figure 6).

AETFAT (Association pour l'Étude Taxonomique de la Flore d'Afrique Tropical) held its first congress on the African continent in Pretoria in 1982. Dr Bernard de Winter, Director of the BRI at the time, was the current General Secretary of the Association, and the institute was responsible for many of the arrangements. The BRI offered a 'Meet and Greet' to the delegates during which Mike was one of the guides who took them through the garden.

Michael was as much a gardener as he was a botanist. He had a wide knowledge of garden plants, with a special love for gymnosperms, and he was involved in the management of the Pretoria Botanical Garden for years. He is well remembered for his involvement in the development of the 'Karoo Koppies', which are now situated between the boom entrance gate and the education centre. Michael directed the placement of large mounds of soil and boulders into their positions. These 'koppies' were later dubbed 'Mike's Mountains'.

In 1993, after 36 years with the BRI, later known as NBI (National Botanical Institute), Mike went into early retirement. One of the reasons for this decision was his health—he had problems with his back, as well as his



FIGURE 6.—Michael with the Minister of Agriculture, Hendrik Schoeman on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Botanical Research Institute (BRI) in 1978.

heart. Furthermore, the Institute was undergoing considerable changes at the time. But I think the main reason were the plans he had already made for his retirement: he was not only a good organizer but also a good planner. He was visualising a fine home surrounded by a splendid garden, overlooking the sea, somewhere in the southern Western Cape. In 1990 Mike and Estelle had made a tour along the south coast from Knysna westward to decide on a place for this home. In 1996 the vision materialized and Mike and Estelle, with their interest in architecture and interior decorating, designed and built the house of their dreams at Froggy Farm in Simonstown: sea view, garden, indoor swimming pool, fynbos surroundings and all. One of their neighbours was Hugh Taylor who had also worked for the BRI for many years. The Wellses had lived in Froggy Farm for eight years when they moved to 178 Heritage Manor, Heritage Park in Somerset West. They also had a hand in the design of this home which includes a sun room for the winter and a cosy, overcrowded study reigned over by creative chaos. Michael's heart condition had deteriorated over the years and he was fitted with several pace-

makers. Shortly before his death he had a fall which further weakened his body, and on 27 May 2010, he passed away.

Michael could also cater for the inner man: he was a creative, improvising cook and a whisky connoisseur of considerable rating: witness a most comprehensive bottlery (= collection of bottles), lovingly amassed over the years and estimated to comprise some 100 specimens (mostly empty), all different brands.

I've used it on the pampas
—as I sipped my matte-tea
I've used it in the beech-hedged lanes
Of Devon's greenery.
I've touched my forelock in greeting
More times than I can tell
In New Zealand and Tahiti
—and in Peru, as well
And always they understood me
And knew that I wished them well!

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