

## OBITUARY

DONALD JOSEPH BOOMER KILLICK (1926–2008)

*Fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*—strong in deed,  
gentle in manner

'Mountains the world over attract not only mountaineers and climbers, but also botanists. The Natal Drakensberg is no exception' (Figure 1). With these words Donald opens the chapter *Plant exploration* in his *A field guide to the flora of the Natal Drakensberg* (Killick 1990), his last major publication and the one that was perhaps closest to his heart. Visualise a forester's cottage among the sweeping, tawny-red *Themeda triandra* grassland on the Little Berg where he spent many lonely (Figure 2) but highly productive hours studying and preserving plant specimens, overlooking winter-brown communities of *Pteridium aquilinum*, cliff scrub with red-flowered *Greyia sutherlandii* and *Aloe arborescens*, dark green patches of kloof forest with *Podocarpus latifolius* and *Scolopia mundii*, and on the summit plateau the bleak and apparently barren afro-alpine heath, at an altitude of about 2 900 m, with species of *Erica* and *Helichrysum*: life against the magnificent backdrop of Cathedral Peak, the Bell, Outer and Inner Horn, the Chessmen, Mitre and Elephant, to name but a few—these last five words Donald would have detested: he had an intense dislike for sloppy lingo, well balanced by his passion for concise, correct language, English as well as Latin. He would also have said that this paragraph is too flowery, or gushy, as he would have put it [for readers without *The Oxford dictionary*: displaying excessive sentimentality], and that the sentences are much too long [see section *Style* in his *Guide to science writing* (Killick 1981b)], and too full of brackets.

Donald Killick (Figure 3) was born in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, on the 6th of May 1926, the son

of a Methodist minister. He attended Maritzburg College from 1940 until matriculation in 1943. From 1945 to 1950 he studied at the Natal University College which became the University of Natal in 1948. He graduated with a B.Sc. in Zoology and Botany (with distinction). The following year he graduated B.Sc. Hons in Botany, and in 1950 he was awarded an M.Sc. degree for the thesis entitled *An account of the plant ecology of the Table Mountain area of Pietermaritzburg, Natal*. For this he won the Junior Captain Scott Memorial Medal of the South African Biological Society in 1954 for the best M.Sc. thesis in botany. The work was published in *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* No. 32 (Killick 1959b).

In 1950 Donald joined the Botanical Research Institute of the Department of Agriculture in the Botanical Survey Section. In September of the same year he was given the task of surveying the Cathedral Peak area of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg for the Department of Forestry. During the survey period, he alternated between Cathedral Peak for the field work, and the National Herbarium in Pretoria for identifying the collected specimens. At the time, he worked under the guidance of L.E.W. (Les) Codd, J.P.H. (John) Acocks and R. (Bob) Story. From 1954 to 1957 he served as South African Liaison Officer at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London. Here he gained valuable taxonomic experience, and he had the opportunity to compare and identify many of his own collections.

After his return to South Africa in 1957, he completed his field work at Cathedral Peak and wrote up the research results as a Ph.D. thesis, *An account of the plant ecology of the Cathedral Peak area of the Natal*



FIGURE 1.—Forestry cottages (with no electricity) on the Little Berg where Donald spent many months studying the Drakensberg flora.

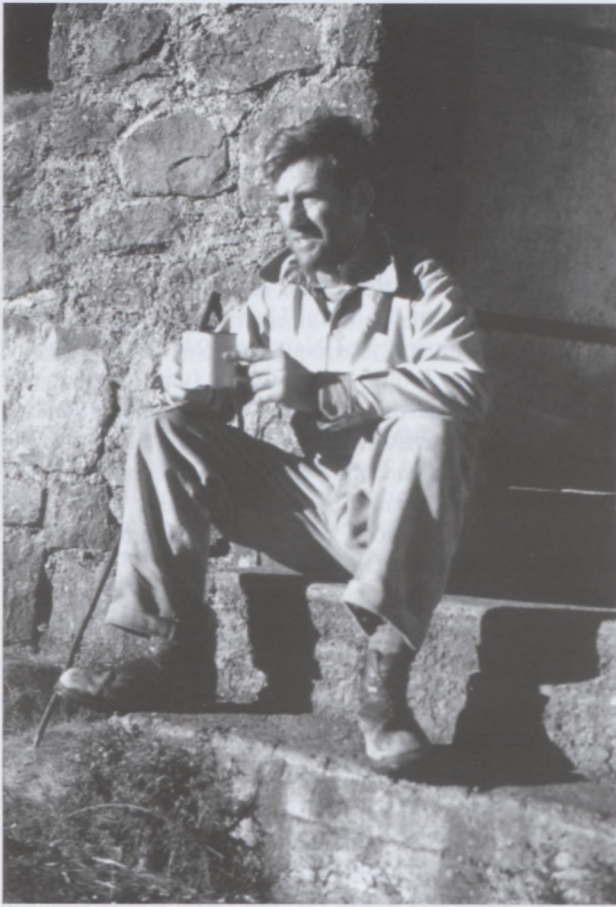


FIGURE 2.—Donald resting against a house of the Mountain Club during a hike across the highest peaks of the Drakensberg.

*Drakensberg* which was published in *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* No. 34 (Killick 1963a). Donald also undertook *ad hoc* ecological investigations of poisonous plants and of burgrass. He started editing the Institute series *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* and assisted B. (Bernard) de Winter, then Officer in Charge of the Botanical Survey Section. As Officer in Charge of the Botanical Survey Section from 1963 to 1966, he directed the research of the Section and was largely responsible for an important change in ecological approach—from descriptive (qualitative) to quantitative methodology. Methods such as association analysis and plotless sampling were introduced, as well as ordination techniques. He took a personal interest in each project and visited the researchers on site. Among them were H.C. (Hugh) Taylor, J.W. (Jeff) Morris, E.J. (Eugene) Moll, M.J. (Mike) Wells, C.J. (Chris) Scheepers and J.P.H. (John) Acocks.

In 1963 he was placed in charge of the administration of all research projects of the Institute and was responsible for the registration and termination of facets and for seeing that project applications, annual project reports and final reports were scientifically acceptable. On the occasion of the 1966 Republic Festival, he joined B. (Bernard) de Winter and his wife Mayda to produce *Sixty-six Transvaal trees* (De Winter, De Winter & Killick 1966) which sparked wide interest in indigenous trees and was the first publication in which numbers were assigned to all known South African trees. In response to public demand, *Readers Digest* commissioned the same

authors to produce a booklet dealing in an abbreviated manner with 55 of the original 66 trees *simply to whet the appetite of the South African public and to show what fun and interest can be derived from an awareness of the trees which one passes on the roadside and in the veld* (De Winter, De Winter & Killick 1974).

From 1966 to 1969 Donald was Officer in Charge of the Flora Section. He directed the research of the Section and also undertook personal taxonomic research. Volume 13 of the *Flora of southern Africa* was the first volume to be written entirely by members of the Flora Section. They were W. (Wessel) Marais, L.E.W. (Leslie) Codd, L.E. (Lars) Kers, H.R. (Hellmut) Toelken, J.A. (Judy) Marsh, O.A. (Otto) Leistner, A.A. (Amelia) Obermeyer-Mauve and Donald himself. During this period, as aids to taxonomic practice, he prepared standard lists of literature abbreviations, author abbreviations and a card index to location of type specimens.

Donald served for a second time as South African Liaison Officer at Kew from 1969 to 1971, a task which he accomplished with distinction. On his return he was appointed Assistant Director. He continued as Officer in Charge of the Flora Section from 1971 to 1973, deputising for J.H. (Jim) Ross who was Liaison Officer at Kew at the time. Donald also became involved with editing, in particular of the Institute series, *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa*.

In 1973 he was promoted to Deputy Director and assumed growing responsibility for three of the publications of the Institute, *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey*

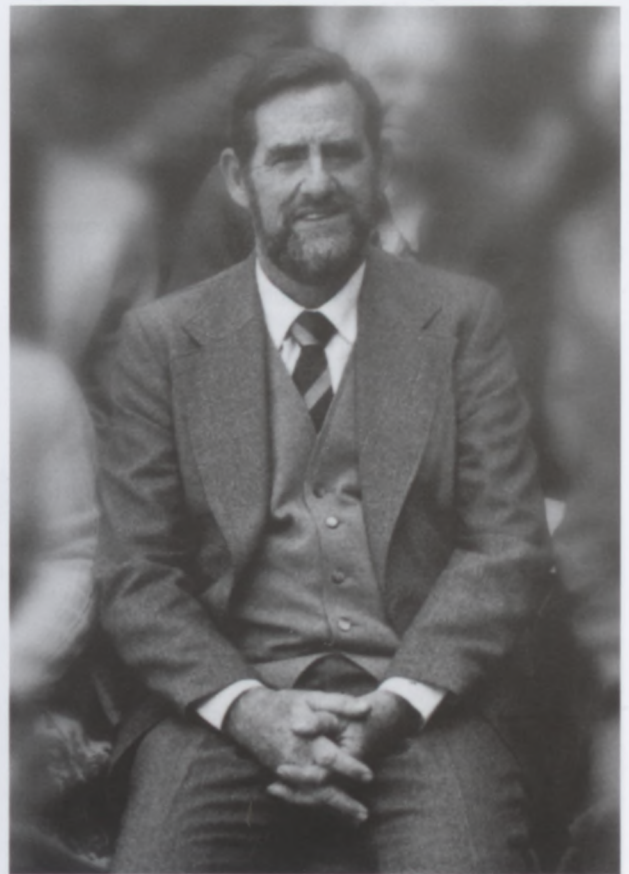


FIGURE 3.—Donald Joseph Boomer Killick (1926–2008).



FIGURE 4.—Presentation of Long-service Awards at the Botanical Research Institute, 13 January 1981. Back row, left to right, horticultural staff, L.C. Steenkamp, A. Pilusa, J. Makena, Stuurman Makena, S. Makena and J. Ehrens. Front row, left to right, herbarium staff, Dr D.J.B. Killick, Dr R.A. Dyer, Ms M.D. Gunn, Dr L.E.W. Codd, and Ms I.C. Verdoorn.

of South Africa, *The Flowering Plants of Africa* and *Bothalia*. He was editor of *Bothalia* from 1972–1985. After his thirtieth year with the Institute he received a Long-service Award together with several other colleagues (Figure 4). When D. (Denzil) Edwards, Assistant Director in charge of the Botanical Survey Section, left the Institute in 1982, he took over the administration of the Institute's research programme. This included the annual evaluation of the 85 research facets in progress at the time. In 1985 he relinquished most of the editorial responsibility for the Institute journals, with the exception of *The Flowering Plants of Africa*. He then took up many administrative tasks, amongst others control of finances and annual reports. On the 31st of March 1989 he retired (Figure 5). A few months later he submitted the final report on his taxonomic studies as part of the Drakensberg-Maluti Mountain Catchment Conservation Programme. In the following year Donald published his *A field guide to the flora of the Natal Drakensberg* (Killick 1990). He continued to answer nomenclatural queries and lectured part-time in plant nomenclature to post-graduate students at the University of Pretoria. He wrote and checked Latin descriptions, refereed articles and wrote up plates for *The Flowering Plants of Africa*. During his last months, which he spent in a retirement village, his health deteriorated gradually and he grew ever weaker, but to the end he was able to attend to his small garden and to read widely, preferably novels. On 16 April 2008 he died suddenly due to failing circulation. He is survived by his wife, Berenice, neé Boegman, whom he met when she was employed at the Institute. From this family union which formed an extremely important part of Donald's life, two sons were born: Stephen, a chartered accountant, and Michael, a civil engineer.

Donald had a considerable impact on botanical science through his furtherance and editing of three of the Institute's publications for many years. The series *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* was under his editorship for 27 years, *Flowering Plants of Africa* for 15 years, and *Bothalia*, the house journal of

the Institute, for 13 years. In addition he was a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of South African Botany*. He gave the journals of the Institute a new look and helped build up their international status. He vetted hundreds of research papers, and rewrote many either partly or completely. Over a period of 36 years he also refereed many articles for the *Journal of South African Botany* and the *South African Journal of Botany*. Authors were continually encouraged to improve the standard of



FIGURE 5.—Donald paging through the commemorative album presented to him on the occasion of his retirement on 31 March 1989.

their research papers. In so doing he has helped to launch numerous botanists on their publishing careers. Donald was promotor or co-promotor of several M.Sc. and Ph.D theses dealing with various branches of botany. He gave lectures on science writing at the Institute and at the University of Cape Town and in 1981 he published his acclaimed and widely consulted *Guide to science writing* (Killick 1981b) dealing with the do's and don'ts in this field. The guide starts with the sentence: 'I believe, and I am sure many other editors of scientific journals will agree, that there has been a steady decline in the standard of science writing in recent years'. He then discusses three possible causes: 'the teaching of grammar has been largely thrown out of the window; instead functional English' is taught at schools. Secondly, 'few universities, if any, teach their students how to write a scientific paper'. The increasing use of multiple-choice examinations at universities is given as a third possible cause. Instead of expressing themselves in writing, students simply have to put a tick in the appropriate box. Reading further in his *Guide to science writing* one not only acquires a deeper knowledge of the subject but one also learns more about the author, a man of great integrity, diligent, meticulous and methodical. And as he writes: 'Another important essential is brevity....Remember that words cost money'. Donald was a man of few, well considered words, both in speech and in writing: 'Write to express—not to impress'. A man not given to bursts of laughter but with a fine sense of humour expressed in a dry manner. An example of a cited cliché as they should not be used by self-respecting authors: *she's as happy as a lark in the knowledge that her husband is slightly musclebound above his 19-inch collar, making his cranial area simply an anatomical device to separate his ears*. Concerning the perceived decline in the standard of science writing: the teaching of grammar will remain on the red data list and multi-choice exams will become ever more popular with professors and lecturers, but there appears to be a marked improvement in the way students at local universities are taught how to write scientific papers, partly, I am convinced, due to Donald's efforts.

In the words of Bernard de Winter, Director of the Institute during the last 16 years of Donald's term of office: 'His retiring nature, matched with a tall frame, neat beard and conservative dress made him seem unapproachable. In all situations he remained the English gentleman who strictly adhered to correct behaviour, and deeply valued the underlying code of conduct this implied. He was a professional in the real sense of the word and a dedicated botanist. A pragmatist, he nevertheless dissuaded his sons from following him in his profession, advising them to choose more lucrative careers. He made enduring friendships but remained a somewhat solitary person to the end'.

Donald has published 80 papers in taxonomy varying from one-page descriptions of new species to full-scale revisions of families running to 39 pages. On the whole, his taxonomic revisions have stood the test of time. His account of *Satureja* (Killick 1961a) was accepted *in toto* by L.E. Codd in his treatment of Lamiaceae in the *Flora of southern Africa*. A revision of the difficult genus *Myrica* (Killick 1969a) was used by N. Grobelaar of the University of Pretoria in research on nitrogen-

fixation and was found to be reliable and in agreement with physiological findings. His paper on the use of the disc as a diagnostic character in *Maerua* (Killick 1969c) created wide interest locally and overseas. He revised several genera of Capparidaceae for the *Flora of southern Africa* (Killick 1970d–g). The revision of Clusiaceae was done in joint authorship with Norman Robson of the Natural History Museum, London (Killick & Robson 1976), and his Flacourtiaceae account, also for the *Flora of southern Africa*, in collaboration with Hermann Sleumer, then with the Rijksherbarium, Leiden (Killick 1976c). In the same volume of the *Flora* he published an account of the Achariaceae (Killick 1976d). During his retirement, he published the name change from *Myrica* to *Morella* together with Roger Polhill & Bernard Verdcourt (Killick, Polhill & Verdcourt 1998).

In volume 52,1 of *The Flowering Plants of Africa*, which is dedicated to him, Donald is described as a *leading light and a refuge to taxonomists lost in the thorny field of botanical nomenclature*. His first nomenclatural 'case' published in 1957 is cited as an example in the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature* and two of his proposals for change of the Code were accepted by the 1981 International Botanical Congress in Sydney (Killick 1981a). Some of his nomenclatural 'cases' were cited in Kew's *Nomenclatural Forum*. Through his work as an editor he was well aware that the general standard of knowledge of plant nomenclature among South African taxonomists left much to be desired. Therefore he presented 2-day courses in the Institute in Pretoria and at the University of Cape Town. They included a lengthy quiz comprising a number of interesting and tricky problems which had to be solved and which tested many of the delegates to, if not well beyond, their limit. His knowledge of plant nomenclature was recognised internationally and he was elected to the Committee for Spermatophyta of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy in 1975, and he was actively involved in the affairs of the Committee until 1981. At the time he was the only South African to have achieved this distinction.

His published account of the plant ecology of the Cathedral Peak area of the Natal Drakensberg is still the definitive work on the vegetation of that region. Prof. Eugene Moll, at the time at the University of Cape Town, described it 'as the best published account of the vegetation of the Natal Drakensberg', and Prof. O.T. Solbrig, former President of the International Union of Biological Sciences, commented: 'it seems to be the last word and little more needs to be done'. Since the account appeared in 1963, Donald had maintained an interest in mountain ecology and had continued to publish on the subject well into his retirement. This includes in-depth discussions of the then poorly known climate of the Alpine Vegetation of eastern Lesotho, the region you enter once you have scaled the Natal Drakensberg from the South African side (Killick 1978d). He was invited to contribute substantive review chapters to four important books (Killick 1978a, 1979a, 1994b, 1997). These reviews were based very largely on his own researches in the Drakensberg and eastern Lesotho. Donald's researches have formed a botanical foundation for much of the management practice and research in the Drakensberg by the Department of Forestry and the KwaZulu-Natal Parks Board.



FIGURE 6.—Donald and Otto Leistner at Katima Mulilo in the Caprivi Strip, 1958/1959, where they collected plants for the *Flora zambesiaca*, *Prodromus einer Flora von Südwestafrika* and *Flora of southern Africa*.

His work on the Drakensberg attracted the attention of a number of prominent botanists who specialised in high-altitude vegetation, such as Prof. and Mrs O. Hedberg (Sweden), Prof. C.G.G.J. van Steenis (Netherlands), Prof. O. Stocker (Germany), Prof. K. Faegri (Norway) and Dr E. Weinert (Germany). All except Dr Weinert visited the Drakensberg in Donald's company. Dr Weinert commented on the reprints of his papers: 'they are of great value to me and I agree with him concerning the definition of the sub-alpine and alpine zones in Africa (and around the world)'.

Donald had a great love for botanical art, and his editing of *The Flowering Plants of Africa*, the Institute's journal devoted to this exquisite art form, gave him particular pleasure. It was the last of the Institute's publications from which he could tear himself away to hand it over to his successor. Not only was he an excellent judge of botanical art but he was equally adept at judging botanical artists. Among several artists who served under him, two deserve special mention: Rosemary Holcroft worked in the Institute from 1975 to 1985. She produced the line drawings for his *A field guide to the flora of the Natal Drakensberg* and executed almost 100 colour plates for *The Flowering Plants of Africa*. Gillian Condy joined the Institute in 1983 and has played a prominent role in the field of botanical art ever since. Donald nominated her for the Jill Smythies Award of the Linnean Society of London and it was presented to her in 1990.

The lectures he gave, most of them by invitation, dealt mainly with the vegetation and flora of the Drakensberg,

including eastern Lesotho, as well as plant nomenclature, science writing and the recording of ecological literature. Lectures were given at the University of Natal, the Museum of Science, Pretoria, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the Royal Horticultural Society, London, the University of Uppsala, the Rijksherbarium, Leiden, congresses of AETFAT in Uppsala, Munich and Pretoria, congresses of SAAB and the 13th International Botanical Congress, Sydney in 1981 where he was invited to defend three of his proposals at the Nomenclature Session. The Presidential address he delivered to the South African Biological Society in 1966 was entitled *Fifty years of plant ecology in South Africa* (Killick 1968c).

He was a member of the following societies: South African Association of Botanists, the Association pour l'étude taxonomique d'Afrique tropicale (AETFAT), the International Association for Plant Taxonomy (IAPT) and the National Committee and the Taxonomy Subcommittee of IUBS. From 1982 to 1985 he was a member of the Professional Advisory Committee for Plant Sciences of the South African Council for Natural Scientists. Donald was also member of advisory committees of the then Department of Agriculture under which the Institute fell at the time. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London since 1956. From 1959 to 1963 he served as Honorary Secretary of the South African Biological Society and he was President of the Society in 1966.

Donald did most of his collecting in KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in the mountains, from Table Mountain in the south, the study area for his M.Sc., to the Cathedral Peak area in the central Drakensberg, the subject of his Ph.D. thesis. Duplicates of his collections from this region are housed in the Donald Killick Herbarium (CPF) in Pietermaritzburg. It falls under the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and comprises about 6 000 vascular plants, mainly of the Drakensberg Mountains and the KwaZulu-Natal coast, collected by employees of the former Department of Forestry. In 1958/1959 he undertook a collecting expedition to the Caprivi Strip (Figure 6) in northern Namibia accompanied by me. There were no mountains to climb but lots of wetlands to be traversed and myriads of mosquitos to be deterred/endured. The collections made during this venture proved valuable in the compilation of three regional floras covering this area: *Flora zambesiaca*, *Prodromus einer Flora von Südwestafrika* and *Flora of southern Africa*. Between 1966 and 1969 he undertook several collecting expeditions to the southern Drakensberg together with Johannes Vahrmeijer. During 1977 he led an expedition to central Lesotho which included several staff members of the Institute and R.E. (Bob) Magill, bryologist and TROPICOS-fundi of the Missouri Botanical Garden. In February 1984, together with Bob Magill and J. (Jacques) van Rooy, bryologist of the Institute, he visited some of his former collecting sites and inspected relevés he had laid out in the Drakensberg and on Table Mountain near Pietermaritzburg (Figure 7), and they collected on top of Sani Pass. In December of the same year he returned to the Cathedral Peak area in the company of Rosemary Holcroft, who prepared drawings for the proposed *Guide to the Drakensberg*



FIGURE 7.—Donald with R.E. (Bob) Magill on a collecting visit to Table Mountain, Pietermaritzburg in 1984.

flora, and Jacques van Rooy, who collected mosses. Shortly before his retirement he undertook an expedition to the highlands of Lesotho in the company of officers of the Institute as well as B.J. (Bruce) Hargreaves, then of Roma University, and an official of the Lesotho Department of Agriculture. In 1994 he visited central Lesotho for the last time accompanied by his wife Berenice and S.M. (Sarie) Perold, hepaticologist of the Institute, who was looking for a new liverwort known to grow near the Oxbow Dam. During that expedition they met Prof. J.G. Duckett of the Queen Mary and Westfield College, London who eventually was the lucky person to find the elusive "mountain nymph" in a rather inaccessible spot. The specific epithet of *Cryptomitrium oreades*, as Sarie Perold named it, is derived from the Greek word for such a delicate creature of the highlands.

Altogether, Donald described 24 new species, published 11 new combinations and collected about 5 000 numbers, mostly with several duplicates. Three species were named in his honour: *Carex killickii* Nelmes and

*Festuca killickii* Kenn.-O'Byrne and recently a fossil fern, *Asterotheca killickii* H.M.And. & J.M.And.

Among the many plant collectors in the Drakensberg that he discusses in his *A field guide to the flora of the Natal Drakensberg*, the place of honour belongs undoubtedly to Hans Justus Thode, a little known pioneer of the High Berg and a man in whom Donald could surely see something of himself. He went to great lengths to trace Thode's life history and he succeeded in finding and interviewing four persons who had been taught by him (Killick 1977f). 'If Thode had one 'magnificent obsession', Donald writes (Killick 1990), 'it was the Drakensberg and its flora'. And he quotes Thode admiring ...'the majestic range of the Kathlambe or Drakensberg which has irresistibly attracted and again and again induced me to climb its lofty heights....What an inexpressible incentive to be the first explorer of this terra incognita, to open this veiled enchanted country to investigating science and to return with trophies of its interesting flora in the form of many a plant still undescribed'.

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- 1954b. *Moraea culmea* Killick, sp. nov. *Bothalia* 6: 436, 437.
- 1954c. *Moraea modesta* Killick, sp. nov. *Bothalia* 6: 437, 438.
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- 1969e. A new species of *Maerua*. *Bothalia* 10: 65–67.
- 1969f. Review: Figs of Hong Kong, by D. Hill. *Bothalia* 10: 129.
- 1969g. *Dovyalis zeyheri* (Sond.) Warb. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 39: t. 1546.
- 1969h. *Erica tenella* Andr. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 39: t. 1552.
- 1969i. *Paranomus reflexus* (Phill. & Hutch.) N.E.Br. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 39: t. 1551.
- 1969j. *Erica axilliflora* Bartl. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 39: t. 1548.
- 1969k. *Leucosidea sericea* Eckl. & Zeyh. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 40: t. 1566.
- 1969l. *Myrsine africana* L. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 40: t. 1564.
- 1969m. *Terminalia phanerophlebia* Engl. & Diels. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 40: t. 1565.
- 1969n. *Bowkeria citrina* Thode. *The Flowering Plants of Africa* 40: t. 1578.
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O.A. LEISTNER\*

\* Formerly: SANBI, Private Bag X101, 0001 Pretoria. Present address: 194 Griselda Rd, Murrayfield, 0184 Pretoria.