

## OBITUARY

HELEN JOYCE VANDERPLANK (1919–2005)

Helen Joyce Vanderplank (Figure 1) was born on 28 July 1919 in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire in England and was educated at the Clifton High School for Girls in Bristol. After her training as a school teacher at the Froebel Educational Institute in Roehampton, London, she went on to become a junior lecturer in the natural history department there. At the insistence of her principal, Dr Frieda Howarth, she enrolled for night classes at Birkbeck College, London University where she qualified with a B.Sc. Hons in Botany and Zoology. Frieda Howarth had a great deal of influence on the young Helen and while working at the Institute they were jointly responsible for the publication by the University of London of the first six books of the *Natural History Series* in the 1950s, written by Dr Howarth and beautifully illustrated by Helen. They obviously had a close working relationship which was amusingly illustrated by Helen's recounting of Frieda's impatience with an importunate young man who asked too many questions and wasted her time: David Attenborough, later to become a world renowned naturalist, was at that time a young man hardly out of short pants and Helen was detailed on many occasions by Frieda to 'take him to the garden and amuse him while I get on with my work'!



FIGURE 1. —Helen Joyce Vanderplank (1919–2005).

Her father, Frederic James Vanderplank, owned a ladies outfitters and was a keen gardener at their home in Bristol and her love for flowers was instilled in her at an early age. She wryly remembered her first parental chastisement at the age of three years when she could not resist her father's exotic poppies.

Her mother was artistic too and was known for her fine leatherwork and Helen was encouraged early on to draw and paint the flowers she loved so well. As was common in upper middle class families of the time, she spent much of her time with her Nanny who nurtured her in her formative years. This bond of affection remained with her throughout her life and when her 'Nan' died, long after she had emigrated, her grief was as keen as for a beloved parent. She had an elder brother, Lionel and a sister, Betty who married and also emigrated to South Africa. The loss of her younger brother, John at the very early age of only 13 from diabetes was a great sadness to her, and her sister has told me that they were close companions and playmates. Their surname, Vanderplank, is Flemish in origin and the original forefathers emigrated to Britain during the time of the Huguenot persecution. She was always very particular about the spelling as one word and its English pronunciation and, until she took South African citizenship, never thought of herself as other than British.

The war years in Britain were not easy and during the 1st World War (before Helen was born), her father experienced a great deal of prejudice from the misconception that his name was German. This probably carried over to the 2nd World War as well and Helen must have experienced some of it too. After the war, life was pretty gloomy in a severely rationed Britain and to escape some of this depression, Helen undertook a trip to visit friends living in what was then Zululand.

She was enthralled by the wide open spaces and the colourful variety of wild flowers she saw. A second visit some years later confirmed her desire to live in South Africa and in 1963 she emigrated to take up a post as teacher in the pre-preparatory section of the Diocesan College, Bishops, in Cape Town. On board ship on her journey to Cape Town, she met Mary Maytham Kidd, wife of the principal of Bishops College, who was the author of *Wild flowers of the Cape Peninsula* (Maytham Kidd 1950). Their common interest in depicting the flowers they loved so well was an immediate bond which was to last throughout their lives. According to Helen, it was Mary Maytham Kidd's mentorship which set her on the path of botanical illustrator. She continued teaching at Bishops until 1971 when, after a short period at St Cyprian's School for Girls in Cape Town, she moved to Grahamstown to take up a post as lecturer in the Grahamstown Teachers Training College. Here she taught until the College closed down in 1975. All these years her art remained a favourite hobby and she earned her living teaching. Now, for the first time, this 'second string' would come in useful. She applied for the post





FIGURE 2. —Helen working on one of the displays at the Albany Museum, Grahamstown.

of Display Artist at the Albany Museum (Figure 2). Her qualifications in natural science and her ability as an artist made her eminently suited to the post and from 1971 to her retirement in 1984 she transformed gallery after gallery using her artistic talents in the widest possible way.

The Children's Gallery, three semi-circular spaces where specimens of wild animals are displayed in their natural habitats of seascape, temperate grassland and desert, was set up as an open 'touch and feel' gallery where children can experience close contact with the animals. Painting the scenic background on the concave walls was a challenge which extended her ability as a landscape artist far beyond the photographic depiction usual in landscape art and gave her many headaches. Next came the setting up of the Invertebrate Gallery where she used a variety of techniques from batik to etching to illustrate and decorate the many small dioramas of creatures on display. The backgrounds of a number of these cases where enlarged models of these microscopic creatures are displayed, bear delicate etchings on crayoned paper of a plethora of these minute animalcules in the finest detail. But the dioramas that are simply taken for granted as windows onto woodland scenes of flowers, mosses and a variety of insects, are the most stunning works of art. The flowers, leaves and insects, all made from silk, wax and wire, are so realistic that visitors assume that they were plucked and posed shortly before their arrival! With typical thoroughness, Helen had spent some weeks during one of her visits home to Britain learning the technique from the expert at the Cardiff Museum and was able on her return to model these specimens so well, that even now, almost 30 years later, the scenes are as fresh as when she had first made them.

In 1982 a new adjunct to the Albany Museum complex was opened. Called the Observatory Museum, it was a restoration of the Victorian home of watchmaker Henry Carter Galpin, one of the quartet of scientists, Atherstone, Rickards, MacOwan and Galpin who identified the Eureka diamond found near Hopetown in 1867. This was the first diamond found in South Africa and it intro-

duced a whole new mining industry. Some years earlier, Harry Oppenheimer's company, De Beers Consolidated, bought the building which was in disrepair and about to be demolished and set about restoring it. This included refurbishing all the living rooms and reworking the Camera Obscura (the only one of its kind in the southern hemisphere set up in 1882) and the Meridian Room with a north/south line on the floor which accurately measures Grahamstown time to be 14 minutes behind South African Standard Time. Helen was closely involved with refurbishing and embellishing the room used by Galpin's sons as a study and playroom. One of these sons was Ernest Galpin the botanist and botanical collector who had the privilege of growing up in this environment and went on to become famous in his own right as one of the founders of botany as a profession in this country. Nature study was a feature of the Galpin home life and in the room are collections of butterflies, plant presses and natural history books all put together by Helen. On the walls, a series of *Oxalis* prints from Jacquin's book (Jacquin 1794), was carefully photocopied onto old off-white typing sheets from the Selmar Schonland Herbarium and then faithfully water-coloured, each according to species, to brighten the room.

The opening ceremony was attended by the Oppenheims and they were presented with a special gift of appreciation, a Victorian posy of Eastern Cape flowers under a glass dome which Helen made with great care and accuracy from silk, wax and wire (Figure 1). Harry Oppenheimer was so taken with this gift that he would not let it out of his sight and insisted on carrying it himself onto the aircraft when they left Grahamstown.

After her retirement in 1984 she busied herself with completing a set of greeting cards for the Department of Nature Conservation. In 1985 a set of six botanical paintings of trees which she made for the 1820 Settler's Memorial Foundation, was awarded a prize in an American competition. As she had never married, there was nothing that bound her to Grahamstown and, about a year after retiring, she decided to sell her house in Grahamstown and move to Port Elizabeth. Not long



after, in 1986, her good friend, Dr C.J. Skead moved to a retirement complex also in Summerstrand near Helen's home and their regular Sunday lunches were added to by day trips into the countryside. Jack Skead is an all-round naturalist with an abiding curiosity in all things natural. He was fully aware of the paucity of written material on the Eastern Cape flora and it was his prompting and subsequent support that moved Helen to embark on her two-volume opus, *Wildflowers of the Port Elizabeth area* (1998, 1999).

Their earliest forays were into the coastal bush and fynbos areas to the south and west of Port Elizabeth. She completed the first 96 plates which were ordered in families according to the calendar months in which they flowered. After unsuccessfully seeking sponsorship for publication from Kirstenbosch, she offered them to Oppenheimer's Brenthurst Library and Press in the hope that they would publish them. A visit in 1989 by the librarian representing Brenthurst confirmed their interest and although they did not see their way clear to publishing the collection in the near future, offered to buy the plates for their Africana collection. Helen agreed and sold the plates, hoping that they would eventually be published.

She and Jack then turned their sights to the dry, bushy country northeast of Port Elizabeth. By this time they had enlisted the help (and protection) of Pieter Coetzee, Director of the Western Districts Council of the Department of Nature Conservation, and William Massyn of the Van Staden's Wildflower Reserve, who helped them to penetrate into areas inaccessible either because of bad roads or the proliferation of urban informal settlements. Of this area, Helen completed 68 plates depicting 380 plants arranged in simple family order, and this time she was successful in getting a sponsor, Billiton Plc Mining Company, for publication. The book was duly published in 1998 and, after negotiating with Brenthurst Press, her previously completed 96 plates were loaned to her for publication in 1999.

Together the two books, in more than 1 000 illustrations, cover at least 900 different plant species. Helen identified most of these plants herself and made a number of trips to the Selmar Schonland Herbarium in Grahamstown. Although her demarcated areas are rela-

tively small, she collected intensively and many of the plants occur much wider afield.

This was also the year in which she turned 80 and she admitted that she was looking forward to a rest. One tends to forget that after the exertion of collecting, the work is far from over and upon return, the artist has to jump to it more or less immediately to capture the true colour and shape of the flowers before they fade.

We had all hoped that after a rest period she might turn her hand to documenting the *Oxalis* species of this area, many of which she cultivated successfully in her garden but beyond a delightful painting of a nosegay consisting entirely of different species of *Oxalis*, this project never got off the ground. After a short illness she died on the 7th of February 2005, leaving a rich legacy of floral art and having added handsomely to the documentation of the plants of the Eastern Cape.

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