

## OBITUARY

ELISE BODLEY (1921–1997)

Elise Bodley (Mrs Appie van Wyk) (Figure 1), one of South Africa's most accomplished botanical artists, died at her home in Bellville near Cape Town on 4th August, 1997, in her seventy-sixth year. As with so many other contemporary botanical artists, illustrating plants in the interest of science was a second career for her. Indeed, it was only in 1980, in her late fifties, that she began to work seriously as a botanical artist. Born at Paarl, the daughter of Thomas Waller and Elizabeth Bodley, Elise grew up in a country environment with the Boland mountains and their magnificent flora virtually on her doorstep. Small wonder then that at the tender age of nine she was already painting wild flowers collected in the veld at nearby Bain's Kloof.

After matriculating from La Rochelle, Paarl, she received her initial art training at the Mowbray Teachers' Training College, Cape Town. In 1946 she was offered the position of botanical artist at the National Herbarium, Pretoria, but she declined to take up the appointment. More tempting prospects beckoned, so instead of opting for formal employment, she decided to further her art training at the Royal Swedish Academy of Art in Stockholm where she remained from 1946 to 1948. After returning to South Africa, Elise devoted many years to teaching, becoming successively, Principal of the Hugo

Naudé Art Centre at Worcester, Principal of the Stellenbosch Art Centre, art lecturer at the Cape Town Training College and art lecturer at the Tygerberg Technical College.

On retiring from teaching she began to concentrate on producing images of South African flora, participating in some 20 group exhibitions between 1979 and 1996, at the Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, the National Gallery, Cape Town, the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Pittsburgh, USA, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC and in other centres. Moreover, Elise was also invited to stage no less than eight one-person exhibitions in South Africa and two in the United States. Inevitably, with such wide exposure, much of her work became dispersed in private collections in South Africa, the USA, Britain, Brazil, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany and France.

Elise's serious involvement with botanical art commenced in 1980 when she began work on an illustrated guide to the Cape Flats flora commissioned by the University of the Western Cape. Although a large collection of paintings was completed, a publication regrettably never materialised. A number were, however, published in calendars produced by the University, which appeared for several years during the 1980's. Similarly, a magnificent



FIGURE 1.—Elise Bodley at work in her studio.

NIEL DU PLESSIS & GRAHAM DUNCAN  
**BULBOUS PLANTS  
 OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A GUIDE TO THEIR CULTIVATION AND PROPAGATION  
 WITH WATERCOLOURS BY ELISE BODLEY



FIGURE 2.—The cover for the book  
*Bulbous plants of southern  
 Africa.*

collection of watercolours depicting succulent species of *Cotyledon*, *Tylecodon*, *Adromischus* and *Crassula* was commissioned with a view to publication. The collection was eventually purchased by the Compton Herbarium, Kirstenbosch but the original publisher was unable to raise sufficient funds to complete the project (it is understood that plans are afoot to publish this work in 1999). On a lesser scale, she also completed a set of illustrations for a handbook on common weeds of the Western Cape. Yet again this proposed work was not published and the artwork was ultimately sold to private collectors. Despite these disappointments, which caused Elise great sadness, she never lost faith in botanists and publishers. However, *Bulbous plants of southern Africa* by N. du Plessis & G. Duncan (1989) (Figure 2), sumptuously illustrated by 47 of her finest plates ultimately brought the fulfilment and recognition she so richly deserved. Most of the originals for this beautiful book were exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC in 1989. The majority were later acquired by appreciative American buyers. Elise pre-

sented one of these plates (plate 15) to the Compton Herbarium where it is now displayed. Probably the largest collection of her paintings (58 originals) is housed in the Compton Herbarium, Kirstenbosch, with smaller holdings at the University of the Western Cape, the National Botanical Institute, Pretoria, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., the Hunt Institute, Pittsburg and the Fynbos Research Unit, Stellenbosch.

Shy, gentle and sensitive, Elise was a quiet, unpretentious person who preferred to remain in the background letting her paintings speak for themselves. They reflect an uncompromising approach to accuracy, tempered by a rich yet beautifully balanced use of colour.

Honours came to her from several sources, among them the National Capital Orchid Society, Washington DC in 1988 (1st place, Professional Class & Best Art Form) while the plates for '*Bulbous plants*' were awarded the Recht Malan Gold Medal in 1990. A year later, in

1991, the Botanical Society of South Africa bestowed the prestigious Cythna Letty Gold Medal on Elise.

With Elise Bodley's passing, there remains a notable legacy of her unpublished artwork in the Compton Herbarium archives. It is to be hoped that these paintings will yet grace an elegant botanical treatise as was her original intention.

She is survived by her artist-husband, Appie, two daughters (both professional artists) and a son, Prof. Ben-Erik van Wyk, Professor of Botany at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU).

J.P. ROURKE\*

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\* Compton Herbarium, National Botanical Institute, Kirstenbosch, Private Bag X7, 7735 Claremont, Cape Town.