

OBITUARIES

ARTHUR KOELEMEN (1915–1994)

Mr Arthur (At) Koeleman (Figure 1), succulent enthusiast and pioneer breeder of aloes, died on 17 July 1994 at the age of 79 from complications brought on by chronic emphysema. 'Oom At', as he was affectionately known, was born on 14 February 1915 in the district Lydenburg in the Transvaal Province, now part of Mpumalanga. After matriculating from the Lydenburg Secondary School in 1932, he studied at the Normaal Kollege in Pretoria and was awarded the Transvaal Teacher's Diploma at the end of 1935. In 1936 Oom At started his teaching career in Carolina, but at the end of the first term he was transferred to Blyde and in 1937 to Linden in Johannesburg. Owing to poor health, he was granted special leave and returned to his parents' home in Sabie, where he worked for a short time at the Glen Lydenburg Mine. After regaining his strength, Oom At returned to teaching and subsequently held various teaching positions, amongst others at the Wonderboom-Suid Primary and the Langenhoven Secondary Schools in Pretoria.

In 1968, at the age of 53, he continued his tertiary education and one year later obtained a B.Sc. degree from the University of Pretoria with Botany and Genetics as majors. A cartoon by L.N. Nel depicting Oom At 'back to school', characteristically with a cigarette in one hand, was published in the journal of the South African Succulent Society, *Aloe* 6,1: 21, January-March 1968 (Figure 2). He then taught again for one year and eventually retired from the teaching profession at the end of 1970. He worked for the Department of Nature Conservation of the Transvaal Provincial Administration in Pretoria (now part of Gauteng) during 1972, at the same time registering for a B.Sc. (Honours) degree in Botany. In 1973, the year during which the degree was bestowed on him by the University of Pretoria, he took up a position as Technical Assistant (Horticulturist) in the botanical garden of the Department of Botany at the same university. He held this position from 1 July 1973 to 30 June 1980. Oom At started his research for a master's degree in Botany in 1973 under Profs P.J. Robbertse and A. Eicker, and on 6 April 1979 an M.Sc. (botany) was conferred on him for a thesis entitled: 'n Morfologies-taksonomiese studie van die blare van die genus *Encephalartos* Lehm. in Suid-Afrika (English: A morphologic-taxonomical study of the leaves of the genus *Encephalartos* Lehm. in South Africa).

In 1950 Oom At bought Plot 29, Hartebeeshoek, a smallholding on the northern slopes of the Magaliesberg north of Pretoria, where he stayed up to the time of his death. Here he started to grow succulents, particularly members of the genus *Aloe*. His growing interest in this genus became a source of great pleasure and an absorbing pastime. He systematically started to hybridize various *Aloe* species and what started as a hobby, eventually developed into a full-scale research nursery. It is for this pioneering work on the hybridization and improvement of aloes that Oom At will probably be best remembered (Irish 1993; Koeleman 1962, 1965). Not only was he one

of the founder members of the South African Aloe and Succulent Society (now the Succulent Society of South Africa) in 1962, but he was also instrumental in establishing the South African Aloe Breeders' Association in May 1973 (Bezuidenhout 1982; De Wet 1982a, b). Some of the earlier volumes of the journal *Aloe*, official mouthpiece of the South African Succulent Society, carried descriptions of numerous new *Aloe* cultivars developed, amongst others, by Oom At; the vouchers for these were almost exclusively deposited in the National Herbarium (PRE) in Pretoria. In fact, these were the first cultivars of any plant group to have been registered in South Africa (De Bruyn 1972). Oom At was also one of the first researchers to establish and refine methods for multiplying species of *Aloe*, *Agave* and *Haworthia* by means of tissue culture (Groenewald, Koeleman & Wessels 1975, 1979; Groenewald, Wessels & Koeleman 1975, 1976a, b, 1977; Wessels, Groenewald & Koeleman 1976). Other novel vegetative techniques, about which Oom At was very secretive, were used to multiply those hybrids registered as cultivars. In later years he also did pioneering work on the use of tissue culture methods for the propagation of species of the cycad genus *Encephalartos* (Koeleman & Small 1982). In addition to his active role in succulent plant studies, Oom At was for many years chairman of the South African Aloe and Succulent Society and editor of its journal *Aloe*. He was subsequently elected as one of the honorary vice-presidents of the society, and maintained an active interest in the hybridization, selection and propagation of species of *Aloe* up to the time of his death in 1994.

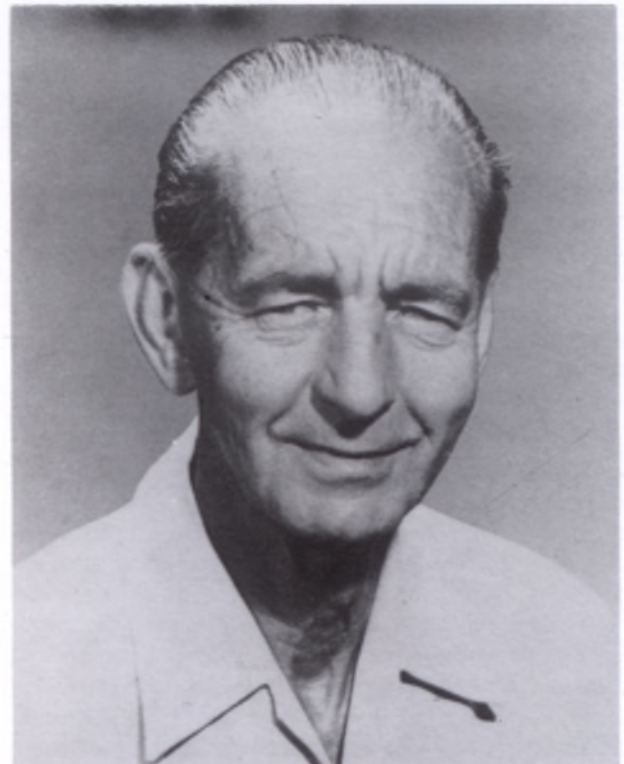


FIGURE 1.—Arthur Koeleman (1915–1994). Photograph taken ± 1980.

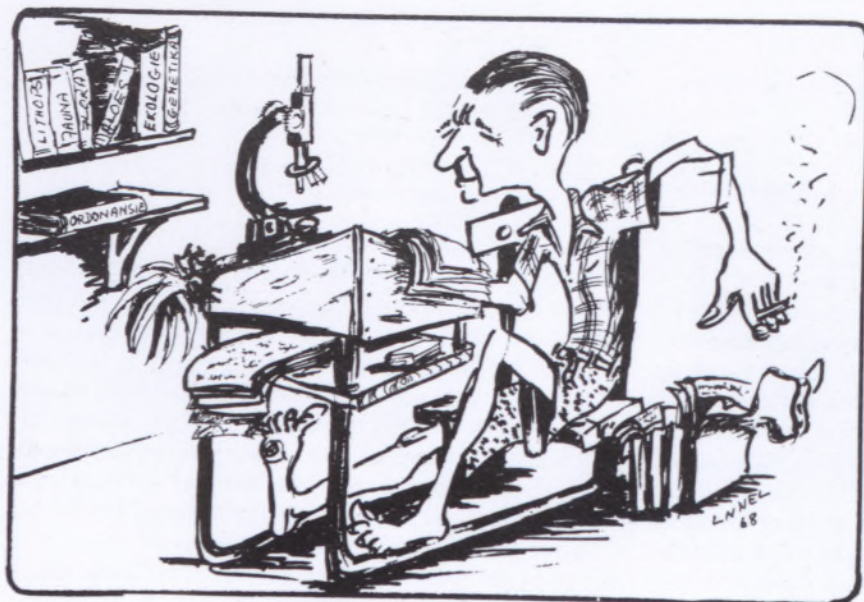


FIGURE 2.—A cartoon of Oom At Koeleman after he resumed his graduate studies at the age of 53. The original caption, translated from Afrikaans, reads 'We hear that our chairman is back on the school bench. All success Oom At.' Reproduced with the kind permission of the editorial board of *Aloe*.

In a sense Oom At was ahead of his times in that he realized the immense horticultural potential of the South African flora, and in particular of the genus *Aloe*, many decades ago. Today most local botanists appreciate the potential of our rich botanical heritage for, amongst others, breeding superior cultivars for the commercial market. But, at the time, Oom At must have been regarded as something of an aloe crank. Sadly, he was often the victim of unfounded and malevolent criticism (see for example De Bruyn 1972). Not surprisingly, during his lifetime Oom At received very little recognition for his work on the cultivation and breeding of aloes. The only response he received on a joint paper on the control of aloe snout beetles (Koeleman & De Wet 1986), was a letter from a farmer in the Karoo enquiring where such beetles could be obtained for use as a means of eradicating aloes from his farm (pers. comm. to G.F. Smith)! His inability to enthuse some of his fellow South Africans about the horticultural and other values of the genus *Aloe* clearly disillusioned him. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he told the first author and Prof. Ben-Erik van Wyk of the Department of Botany at the Rand Afrikaans University, during a visit to his nursery, Magaliesberg Navorsingskwekery, that he had destroyed most of his notes on and records of his crossing experiments in *Aloe*. A great pity, indeed. Fortunately, at least some of his cultivars are still being grown at the Pretoria National Botanical Garden and at the Lowveld National Botanical Garden in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga, and in the private gardens of a few succulent enthusiasts.

Oom At was a gentle, calm, soft-spoken and unassuming man of great integrity. Never forward or self-seeking in the progress with his research, he was nevertheless zealous and resolute in achieving the goals which he set himself and would strongly defend any views he believed were correct. Oom At could be carried away by the splendour of the *Aloe* hybrids he created, and new flowers were always awaited with considerable anticipation. He was a friendly and helpful man, always willing to share his knowledge and inspiring enthusiasm with those who showed interest in his work. As a trained teacher, the youth were close to Oom At's heart and, as can be seen

from his inspiring writings in past issues of *Aloe*, he always tried to instill in young people a love and appreciation for our succulent flora. On a lighter note, Oom At was very fond of reading 'cowboy stories', and many an evening he would retire with a soft cover 'noveltjie' and a plate of oranges, one of his favourite fruit.

On 8 January 1944 Oom At married Maria Magdalena Johanna Bezuidenhout (born 18 April 1917 at Kathu in the Northern Cape). Tannie Rie, as she was familiarly known, was Oom At's lifelong companion. An elegant lady with a beautiful, sparkling personality, she fully supported Oom At in his work and often assisted with the task of cross-pollinating the *Aloe* plants. Tannie Rie is commemorated in *Aloe* 'Ria Koeleman' [a hybrid between the Madagascan *A. capitata* Baker (variety unknown) and the southern African *A. maculata* All.], a cultivar bred by Oom At (Koeleman 1971). Despite setbacks in health experienced by both, they greatly assisted each other during their last years together. Tannie Rie passed away on 1 April 1993. The couple had no children.

It was Oom At's longstanding ambition to submit his work on the breeding of aloes for a doctoral degree at a university. Unfortunately this ideal was not to be realized. Arthur Koeleman will, however, long be honoured as the man who pioneered the breeding and improvement of *Aloe*. He was a man with foresight, and his life was an inspiring model of what can be achieved through dedication, enthusiasm and hard work. He is fittingly commemorated in *Aloe* 'Oom At', a handsome cultivar bred by Mr Gawie Dednam from a cross between *A. reitzii* Reynolds and *A. arborescens* Mill. Oom At will be remembered with affection and respect by all those who knew him.

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G.F. SMITH* and A.E. VAN WYK**

* Plant Systematics Research Subdirector, National Botanical Institute, Private Bag X101, Pretoria 0001.

** H.G.W.J. Schweickerdt Herbarium, Department of Botany, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002.