

OBITUARIES

WINSOME (BUDDY) BARKER (1907–1994)

The death of Winsome Barker (Figure 1) on 27 December 1994 at Wynberg, Cape, was more than just the close of a long chapter in the history of Kirstenbosch. It was—particularly for the Compton Herbarium—the end of an era. From 1929 when she arrived at Kirstenbosch to take up the Solly Scholarship until the late 1980's, when increasing infirmity prevented her from visiting the herbarium, her entire life revolved around the collection she built up with such devotion and diligence. Sadly, so many years have passed since her retirement in 1972 that now there are few members of the present staff of the National Botanical Institute who still remember her or are even aware of the magnitude of the contribution she made over a period of 43 years. In short, the story of her life and work is essentially the history of the founding and early development of the Compton Herbarium at Kirstenbosch.

Winsome Fanny Barker, the daughter of William Joseph Barker of Seaham, County Durham and his wife Beatrice (née Cusens), was born at Jamestown in the Eastern Cape on 23 September 1907. The family later moved to East London where her father became senior history master at Selbourne College and subsequently Inspector of Schools for the Eastern Cape. After matriculating from East London Girls High School, Winsome proceeded to Rhodes University College at Grahamstown to take a B.Sc. in Botany and Zoology, graduating in 1928 with the highest marks in her class for which she was awarded the Junior Captain Scott medals in both major subjects. She declined a University Scholarship to undertake an M.Sc. in Botany, but instead accepted the Solly Scholarship offered by the newly established National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch for a young graduate wishing to study the South African Flora—a much more appealing option to Winsome's mind than getting further involved with academic botany. This was probably the most important decision in her life.

Thus, early in 1929 Miss Barker arrived at Newlands Station where the Kirstenbosch pony and trap were waiting to transport her down leafy oak-lined lanes to Kirstenbosch, then still a rather inaccessible countryfied destination where she finally disembarked at Pearson House, the garden's hostel for lady staff members. Apart from a brief interlude it was to be her home until 1972.

The director, Prof. R H Compton, was away at the time and so Buddy (as she was known to her friends) found herself placed under the wing of Louisa Bolus who was to be her guide and mentor for the two year duration of the Scholarship. It was a fortuitous start. Mrs Bolus, Curator of the Bolus Herbarium, then housed at Kirstenbosch, was a dedicated, thorough teacher; Miss Barker an eager receptive student. Buddy received a sound practical exposure to the current methods of plant taxonomy as well as a rigorous training in what may best be described as 'Bolusian' methods of herbarium practice and manage-

ment. Field work was not neglected either. Yet again the potent influence of Louisa Bolus made itself felt. Here Buddy describes her first serious collecting expedition:

'It was Mrs Bolus who took me on my first botanical collecting trip to the North Western Cape, where at Nieuwoudtville in an exceptionally good season, I saw my first spring display in all its glory, an unforgettable memory, which will remain with me always, as being more wonderful than my wildest dreams could have imagined. The wealth of species, as well as their beauty astounded me, and my ambition to be a systematic botanist began to crystallise.'

At the conclusion of her scholarship term Buddy was contracted to work in the herbarium at Kew by the Bentham Trustees and there she further broadened her experience in herbarium practices for some 2½ years between February 1931 and July 1933.

But Kirstenbosch soon beckoned again and in September 1933 she was offered an appointment as Botanical Assistant to the Director at a salary of £18 per month.



FIGURE 1.—Winsome Fanny Barker, photographed in 1973, a year after her retirement.



FIGURE 2.—The director's office in the nursery at Kirstenbosch, first home of the Compton Herbarium 1935–1940. Here Miss Barker assembled the first 18 cabinets of specimens before moving to the present herbarium building in April 1940. Note the plant press on the front step.

Although initially only a temporary position it was the first purely scientific post created by the Trustees of the National Botanic Gardens. Miss Barker's duties in the original words of her letter of appointment: 'would chiefly involve work more or less connected with systematics'. This was indeed to be the case although the circumstances under which she had to work were rather unusual in that her salary was paid by the National Botanic Gardens yet she effectively worked within the precincts of the Bolus Herbarium contributing material to their collection which of course belonged to the University of Cape Town. However, this anomalous situation did not last long. Indeed, after several years of mounting tension between Prof. Compton and Mrs Bolus regarding the siting of the Bolus Herbarium on the Kirstenbosch estate, matters came to a head in 1934 when the University agreed to Mrs Bolus' request to re-locate the Bolus Herbarium on their newly developed campus at Rondebosch. Thus in appointing Miss Barker, Prof. Compton astutely anticipated the even-

tual removal of the Bolus Herbarium from Kirstenbosch. Early in 1935 Miss Barker moved from the Bolus Herbarium to the director's office in the nursery at Kirstenbosch where under Prof. Compton's supervision she began to accumulate material for an independent gardens herbarium (Figure 2). (This historic building which housed the first cabinets of the gardens herbarium was demolished in March 1995 to make way for a new conservatory.) However, although Compton and Miss Barker began to build up the Kirstenbosch Herbarium as an independent collection in 1935, four years passed before the trustees of the National Botanic Gardens formally resolved, in October 1939, to start a new herbarium, the Bolus Herbarium having vacated the herbarium building at Kirstenbosch a year earlier in May 1938. In addition to Miss Barker's salary, expenditure of a further £350 for the first year was sanctioned to cover the salaries of other necessary personnel and the cost of acquiring preliminary equipment.



FIGURE 3.—Winsome Barker examining specimens in the present Compton Herbarium building ± 1948.

Thus it was that on April Fool's day 1940, the embryo 18-cabinet National Botanic Gardens herbarium was moved from the Director's office into the empty structure previously occupied by Bolus Herbarium. By the end of that year a further 14 cabinets of specimens had been added bringing the total to 32. There had been a great deal of growth since those humble beginnings in 1935 for which Buddy Barker was almost entirely responsible. Recognising this achievement, her salary was raised to £22 10 shillings as from 1 January 1941 but, more importantly, Prof. Compton informed her of her new responsibilities: 'it is understood that you will take control of the work of the herbarium for which you will be responsible to the Director of the Gardens'. The gardens herbarium was now a functional entity with Buddy Barker at the helm (Figure 3). Under her direction it was about to enter a long phase of sustained growth despite many difficult years of financial privation enforced by wartime and post-war economic stringency. Frugality and thrift were at all times the watchwords.

At the outset Buddy set exceptionally high standards with regard to the quality of the material incorporated. She developed a technique for laying out dissected floral parts on gummed card, invaluable in the case of fugacious petaloid monocotyledons and certain succulent groups such as the Asclepiadaceae. With limitless patience she assembled complete sets of material for those difficult groups like the Amaryllidaceae—where leaves, flowers and fruits are produced at different seasons, until complete sets of a plant's life history could be arranged on a herbarium sheet instead of merely one phase as is so often the case. All this material had to be carefully labelled and cultivated in shade houses adjacent to the herbarium. Some of the horticulturists like Harry Hall worked closely with her cultivating specimens for which different developmental stages were needed but more often than not Buddy found herself in the role of horticulturist, repotting, spraying, weeding or watering the research collections herself.

By the mid 1950's the herbarium had grown to 70 000 sheets, increasing to 110 000 sheets by the time she retired. (Over 10 000 were her own collections made mainly in the western Cape and Namaqualand.) Practically every one of these sheets passed through her hands or was subjected to her critical scrutiny at some stage during their processing while the majority are inscribed in pencil in her neat distinctive handwriting towards the lower right hand corner.

Probably the most dramatic development that took place during her curatorship was the transfer of the South African Museum Herbarium to Kirstenbosch in 1956. This historically priceless 100 000 sheet herbarium founded in 1825 was offered to Kirstenbosch on permanent loan, provided the curator, Dr Joyce Lewis and her assistant could be accommodated on the staff. For practical, archival, and historical reasons the two herbaria were never merged but the staff had to be integrated. It was a potentially touchy situation. The end result was that Buddy Barker remained Curator and assumed most of the administrative duties while Joyce Lewis became full time research officer. However, Buddy always respected Joyce's association with the South African Museum Herbarium, and Joyce

continued to curate it as well as draw and refile loans until her death in 1967.

A steadfast commitment to the goal of building up the herbarium meant that there was little time available for research yet despite these constraints she maintained a strong interest in the Amaryllidaceae and Liliaceae (*sens. lat.*) especially *Lachenalia* on which she published extensively. Regrettably, Buddy never completed her long awaited revision of the genus. All her publications were illustrated with her own drawings. Through the influence of her mother (who was herself an accomplished artist), Winsome was encouraged to draw and paint from early childhood. By the time she had graduated from University, she had developed into a skilled botanical illustrator. At least 35 of her colour plates were published in *The Flowering Plants of South Africa* between 1930 and 1938. The Royal Horticultural Society in London acquired a fine set of her watercolours depicting different forms and variations of *Agapanthus*. Some of these were used to illustrate Frances M. Leighton's 'The genus *Agapanthus* L' Heritier' (*Journal of South African Botany* Suppl. Vol. 4, 1965). By far the largest collection of her work (now held in the Compton Herbarium at Kirstenbosch), is a portfolio of 107 as yet unpublished colour plates of *Lachenalia*, painted between 1930 and about 1950 to illustrate a planned revision of the genus (Figure 4).

As if developing and running the herbarium, providing an identification service, publishing papers and preparing botanical illustrations were not enough, Buddy also found herself responsible for training the Solly Scholars. In all, twelve young graduates enjoyed the benefit of the same exhaustive training in herbarium work that she herself had received. Eventually however, inflation so diminished the value of the scholarship that it lapsed into a state of dormancy. Nevertheless, in its heyday, its influence was considerable and many ex-Solly scholars who were trained under Buddy came to hold key positions in herbaria throughout South Africa.

I first met Buddy in June 1958 when, as a schoolboy, I brought a few plants to the herbarium which I had not been able to identify myself. Well do I remember the courtesy with which she received me, the help I was given and the thrill of handling the herbarium sheets. I remember too being struck by the quiet, scholarly, almost monastic atmosphere of the old building set on a hillside above the garden, in dense natural fynbos alive with sugarbirds, bulbuls and white-eyes. It seemed to me to be a very desirable place to work. The whole establishment had its own distinctive atmosphere which mirrored her own temperament—disciplined and orderly. Buddy was a modest self-effacing person who eschewed the limelight and was never happier than when she was getting on with the job she did so well. Her natural restraint sometimes made her appear slightly aloof to strangers yet few realised this was merely a mask that hid a shy sensitive personality. There were undoubtedly times when she felt frustrated that she had not managed to do more research, yet she found great fulfillment in developing the collection, which became the Compton Herbarium, from its very inception into a viable institution, thereby laying the foundations for future research in plant systematics at

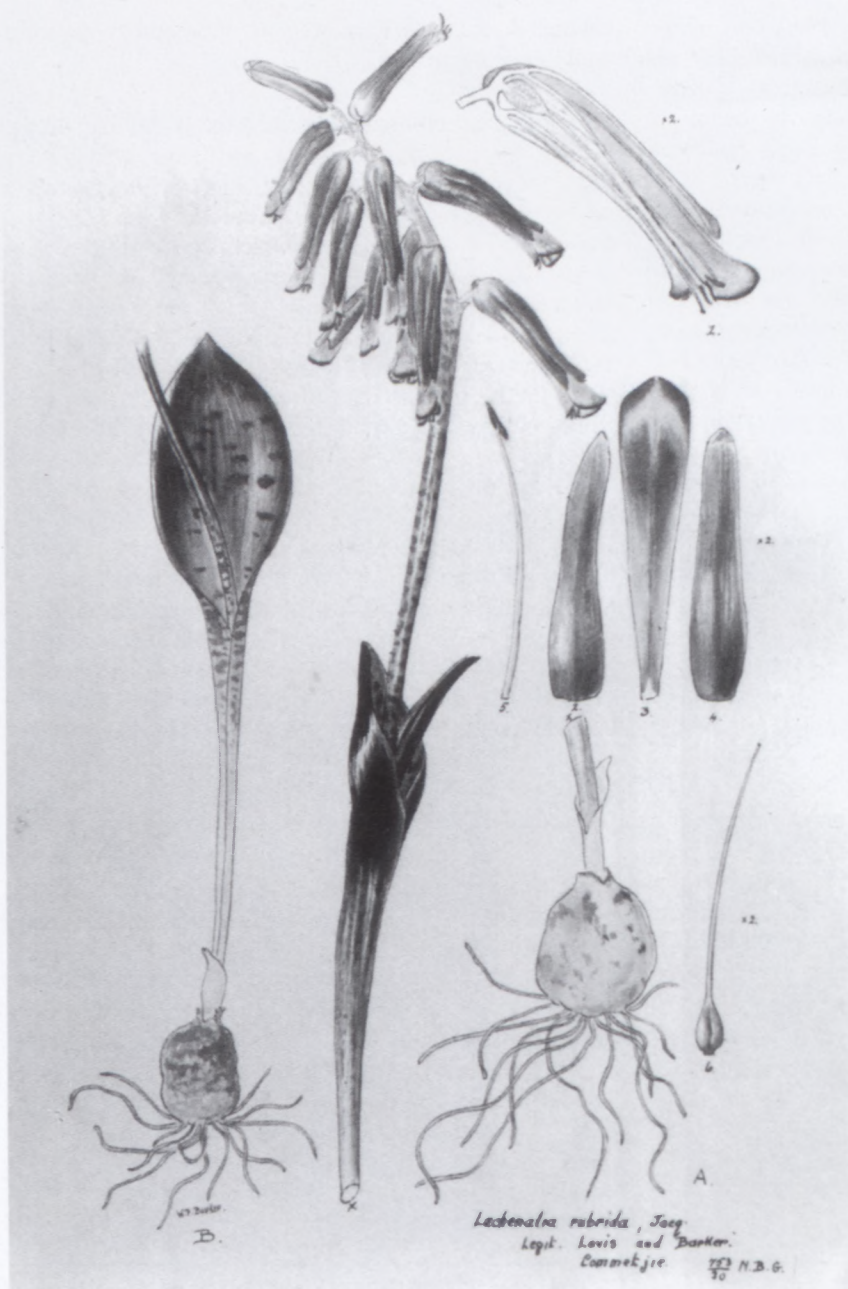


FIGURE 4.—*Lachenalia rubida* Jacq. painted by Winsome Barker in 1930. This is one of a collection of 107 of her colour plates of *Lachenalia*.

Kirstenbosch. It was an outstanding achievement in anyone's terms for which she will be remembered and honoured as one of the National Botanical Institute's great pioneers. Her name is commemorated in

several South African plants, among them *Leucadendron barkeriae* I. Williams, *Haemanthus barkeriae* Snijman, *Lachenalia barkeriana* U. Müll.-Doblies and *Romulea barkeriae* M.P. de Vos.

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