

FRIEDRICH VON BREITENBACH OMS (1916–1995)

The study of trees in southern Africa suffered a grievous loss on 21 June 1995 when Dr Friedrich von Breitenbach (Figure 6) was killed in a motor accident in Pretoria. 'Oom Boom' was in every way a larger-than-life character, and those who met him are unlikely to forget the experience. The one overriding characteristic which impressed all those who knew him was his enthusiasm for all that he tackled. He possessed a thorough knowledge of dendrology, and was conversant with numerous other disciplines.

'Fried' von Breitenbach was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (then part of Germany, now Kaliningrad, Russia) on 1 August 1916. He was an only child, and was orphaned at the age of two. He was educated first at the Technische Hochschule, Dresden, 1935–1939, and then at Königsberg University, 1939–1943, graduating Dip. Forstingenieur, Dr.Jur., Dr.rer.nat. He was seconded from the army as a research officer in the German State Forests,

1939–1945, and worked in Finland and Russia; we are given to understand that at this time he achieved the unusual distinction of escaping twice from the Russian army. Nevertheless, he later became a research worker at the University of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1946–1949, and then at Leningrad (now St Petersburg), 1949–1955. He returned to West Germany and became a Forestry Planning Officer from 1955–1958. After this he took up the post of Forest Adviser to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and subsequently became Director of Forestry in Ethiopia, 1958–1963.

He came to South Africa in 1963 and was appointed to the Forest Research Institute as District Forest Officer in the Western Cape on 16th October of that year. Initially based at Saasveld, near George, he developed and implemented the first scientific sustainable timber utilisation programme based on conservation-orientated multiple land

use principles. The system he applied to the southern Cape forests is regarded as one of the best of its kind as applied to indigenous forest timber in the world (Von dem Bussche 1992). He later moved to the Forestry Research Institute in Pretoria, eventually becoming Chief Professional Officer for research and planning regarding indigenous forests. He conducted woodland surveys in northern Namibia and carried out ecological surveys of the Natal and Transvaal forests. He also produced a comprehensive report on nature conservation and forestry legislation in the former states (homelands) of southern Africa. He retired at the unusually advanced age of 75, on 31 March 1992. After he retired, he continued working without pay, to complete his reports on indigenous forests (Von Breitenbach 1990b). Reports on several forests, namely Mpesheni, Engeli, Woodbush, De Hoek, Wolkberg, Steilkop, New Agatha and Entabeni, were almost ready for press.

His contributions to the literature on the forest and tree flora of southern Africa and Ethiopia include 11 books, some of which ran to more than one edition in his lifetime, and numerous scientific and more popular papers (Figure 7). The more easily accessible of these are listed in the bibliography appended to this obituary. It is interesting to note that the Finnish forestry advisers in Namibia have reprinted his book on Eastern Caprivi trees (Von Breitenbach 1967).

In a series on tree names published in *Trees in South Africa* from 1972 to 1976 he took up the tree numbers devised by De Winter *et al.* (1966) and information from the



FIGURE 6.—Dr Friedrich von Breitenbach OMS, with his Order for Meritorious Service decoration. Photo: Martin Gibbs.

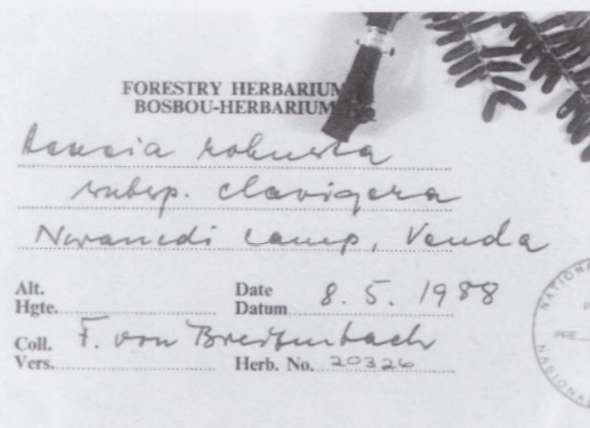


FIGURE 7.—Dr Von Breitenbach's handwriting, from a specimen in PRE. Photo: A. Romanowski.

first edition of *The National List of Trees/Die Nasionale Boomlys* by De Winter & Vahrmeijer (1972). He was joint author with De Winter and Vahrmeijer of the second edition of *The National Tree List* which appeared in 1978. The first edition of the 'green book': *National list of indigenous trees/Nasionale lys van inheemse bome* compiled by Dr von Breitenbach and published by the Dendrological Foundation appeared in November 1986. It was followed by a second impression in September 1987, a third impression in November 1988 and a second revised edition in January 1990. A third edition appeared in April 1995. A 'yellow book': *National list of introduced trees/Nasionale lys van ingevoerde bome*, in which about 1000 species are listed and supplied with numbers prefixed with an 'X', appeared in March 1984, to be followed by three further impressions and a second, revised edition which was published in 1989.

Dr von Breitenbach not only spread the word by publications, but also by giving lectures to various professional and amateur societies (Figure 8), as for example one to the Tree Society at their 26th Annual General Meeting (Meintjies 1973) on *Forests and trees of Ethiopia*. He also served as editorial consultant to several international and national scientific journals on botany and forestry. He kept close contact with dendrologists in many other countries and organized visits to southern Africa by members of the International Dendrological Society in 1988 and the Swiss Dendrological Society in 1992.

Fried and his wife Jutta were elected to the Tree Society committee at the 1980 Annual General Meeting (Katz 1980); Fried was elected to the post of vice chairman the next year (Higgs 1981), but was not mentioned at all in later accounts of this society's meetings. Dr Von Breitenbach was convinced that it was extremely important to involve the South African public in tree and nature conservation, and he spent an astonishing amount of energy and time to achieve this goal.

The Dendrological Foundation was established in Pretoria in 1979 with himself as chairman and one of the trustees. The objectives were the promotion, protection and preservation of trees and tree-dominated ecosystems by means of education and training, technical services, scientific research and publications. Membership was re-



FIGURE 8.—An English-language class of the Dendrological Society's Tree Knowledge Course at their first lecture session. Photo: J. von Breitenbach.

stricted to persons contributing financially or by voluntary work as researchers, lecturers, authors, editors etc. The board of trustees was constituted of eminent conservationists. The Dendrological Foundation was the parent organisation of the Dendrological Society of South Africa, which was founded in Pretoria in September 1980, with Dr von Breitenbach as first and only executive President and his wife as Honorary Secretary/Treasurer. This society attracted hundreds of members of the public over the years and claimed to be the fastest growing conservation body in South Africa. There are now almost 50 branches in various parts of the country, and even as far afield as Namibia. It concentrates on both one-day and weekend field excursions, and presents tree knowledge courses. The National Register of Big Trees was a product of this society, with Dr von Breitenbach as its keeper.

Dr and Mrs von Breitenbach produced *Dendron*, the newsletter of the Dendrological Society. This started out as the *Dendrological Foundation Newsletter/Nuusbrief Dendrologiese Stigting* in April 1979, and ran to 31 numbers until December 1993. It contained reports on branch activities and other news of interest not only to members of the society, but to everyone concerned with trees and nature conservation. Dr von Breitenbach was editor of the *Journal of Dendrology/Dendrologiese Tydskrif*, which he started in 1981. This occasional publication appeared in 13 numbers between then and 1991. Dr and Mrs von Breitenbach were not only the publishers of this journal; they wrote the majority of the articles. He took most of the photographs while she did the line drawings. He often wrote book reviews, and rarely short notes, under the

pseudonyms 'F.C. Brideswater' and 'F.K.M. von Westphalen'. The latter name is derived from his mother's (née Countess von Westphalen) maiden name. It seems that he used these pen-names for items which he considered to be of less scientific value than those to which he attached his own name. Several lists of common names of trees in black languages of South Africa appeared in the *Journal of Dendrology*. These lists are regarded as lists of standard names in the languages concerned.

He felt strongly that all aspects of nature conservation should be co-ordinated and so he was instrumental in the formation of the South African Nature Federation in 1987. The idea was to provide a framework in which all non-governmental organisations which are involved in conservation or related activities could co-operate. This Federation was to have held its first congress on 8 July 1995. He was interested in all inhabitants of forests, animals as well as plants, but tended to regard herbivores, even those naturally resident in the forest, as a threat to the trees.

'Dendroco', the South African Dendrogenetic Development Co-operative Ltd., with Dr von Breitenbach as its driving force and chairman, was established in March 1991. This registered primary agricultural co-operative is a self-financing development project which promotes the planting of indigenous trees by means of selective propagation and marketing of suitable cultivars for urban, agricultural and industrial use. The scheme involves a number of private tree breeders.

Dr von Breitenbach's most ambitious project in the line of publications was the *Tree atlas of southern Africa/Boomatlas van Suider-Afrika*, the bilingual encyclopaedic opus on the \pm 1000 indigenous trees of southern Africa, with himself and his wife as co-authors. Unfortunately only section I, covering the ferns and gymnosperms, has so far appeared. However, we are given to understand that production of the second volume is quite far advanced.

He collected relatively few (about 1000) specimens, mainly in the forests of the Western and Eastern Cape, and in Namaqualand, Caprivi and Ovambo/Kavango area (Namibia), and from cultivation; these were in SAAS and PRF, but were transferred to PRE in 1992/1993. He also collected specimens in Ethiopia; these are housed in Addis Ababa.

He was married to Jutta (née Hofrichter) on 17 June 1961. She became his lifelong companion and co-worker; many of his publications are illustrated with her line drawings. They had no children.

In recognition of Dr von Breitenbach's contributions to forestry, dendrology and environmental conservation, he was awarded the Order for Meritorious Service on 24 November 1992 by the State President.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Mr G. Germishuizen and Dr O.A. Leistner (NBI) for providing us with some of the information used in this obituary. Ms H. Söhnge (Department of Forestry) made the item by Dr Von dem Bussche available to

us, and Mrs M.A. Tapson (Forestek, CSIR) gave us valuable assistance in preparing the bibliography. Special thanks are due to Mrs Von Breitenbach for making the pictures available to us. Drs R.J. Poynton and B. de Winter read drafts of the manuscript and made helpful suggestions.

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