

OBITUARY

HEDLEY BRIAN RYCROFT (1918–1990)

The death at the end of last year of Brian Rycroft (Figure 1), marks the end of a great chapter in the history of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa which he served as Director for 31 years. It was a period of development and expansion of the organisation, during which the name of Kirstenbosch became so well known locally and overseas.

Hedley Brian was born in Pietermaritzburg on 26 July 1918, the only son of Frederick Charles Rycroft and Winifred Fanny Dicks. The family originally came from Bedford in Britain. His father was a farmer on a small farm outside Howick but when his wife inherited a small general dealer's store in the town they decided to give up farming. Old man Rycroft was a very friendly and kind person but not a born businessman who saw to his clients settling all their debts. Consequently the family had endless financial difficulties. Brian received his primary schooling at Howick where, at the age of six, he had started collecting his first flowers. Later he went to Maritzburg College where he was head boy during his final year in 1936.

Rycroft remained in that city to attend the Natal University College of the University of South Africa where he studied ecology. At the time he must have come under the influence of that well known mentor of fine ecologists, Prof. Adolph Bayer (Figure 2), who was head of botany. Rycroft majored in botany and geography for his B.Sc. degree, awarded in 1939, and then obtained his M.Sc. degree with distinction in 1941 for a thesis on the Karkloof Forest and immediate environs.

During those student days he experienced financial difficulties even to the extent of barely getting enough to eat at times. This forced him to borrow money to pay for his fees.

With his ecological interests and a fascination for trees, Rycroft wanted to work in the Department of Forestry but found that a forestry degree was required. So he proceeded to the University of Stellenbosch to enrol there for a B.Sc. (For.). This was during the War years and financial problems again plagued him, forcing him to seek additional income. This he obtained in a most unusual way. The university had advertised for 'an acceptable young male student to escort nurses to and from the hospital at night!' Rycroft got the job and the accommodation and, of course, excellent company. All his spare time was spent at the hospital; he drove the ambulance, attended post mortems and helped at many operations as an unofficial nurse. He was even heard to pronounce 'I could have done an appendectomy if necessary!' (Dry 1980).

During all this stimulating activity the young Rycroft managed to study forestry and get his degree in 1944. The same year he obtained the post of Forest Research Officer and District Forest Officer at Jonkershoek just outside

Stellenbosch, a post he held from 1945 to 1953. At the same time he was a part-time lecturer in forestry at the university dealing with subjects such as forest botany. In 1947 he married Maureen Alfreda Starke who had obtained her music degrees at Stellenbosch University and then returned as a teacher to her old school, Rhenish, where she had been headgirl.

While at Jonkershoek with its superb mountainous environs, Rycroft came under the spell of the Cape Fynbos, like several of his well known successors: Hugh Taylor, Oliver Kerfoot and Fred Kruger. He conducted research on the mountain vegetation, mainly in connection with hydrology and began a project for which he obtained a Ph.D. degree at the University of Cape Town in June 1951. Several papers resulted from his research at this time.

His involvement with indigenous vegetation brought him into contact with the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch and with the Botanical Society which he joined in 1945. He became a member of that Society's Wild Flower Protection Committee in 1950 and a member of its Council in 1952. With his close links to these



FIGURE 1.—Hedley Brian Rycroft (1918–1990) was awarded the Decoration for Meritorious Service and the medal was presented to him by the State President Marais Viljoen in March 1980.



FIGURE 2.—Prof. Rycroft with Prof. Adolph Bayer in 1968 (photo: Natal Witness).

organisations, which were not fortuitous, and with his background and training, Rycroft was ideally suited for the post of Director of the National Botanic Gardens. When a successor for Prof. Harold Compton was sought on his retirement in December 1953, after 35 years as Director, the selection committee's choice of Rycroft from among a list of nine applicants was unanimous.

Rycroft thus began his long and distinguished career at Kirstenbosch in January 1954 as the third director in succession to Pearson and Compton. The phenomenal growth of the gardens over the next 30 years reflects the enthusiasm, determination and foresight that were so much part of Rycroft's character. Two aspects which will stand as permanent memorials to his efforts are the development of a set of regional botanic gardens and the greatly increased interest in the South African flora both locally and all around the world.

Rycroft & Ryan (1980: 32) noted that Pearson, in his original motivation for the establishment of the National Botanic Gardens, had been wise to suggest more than one botanic garden because there are so many different climates in South Africa. As early as 1921 a Karoo Garden was established near Matjesfontein to grow succulent plants. For logistical reasons, however, it was moved to Worcester in 1948. After his appointment Rycroft immediately began a major program of establishing regional gardens. By 1970 the number of gardens had increased to seven with the addition of the Orange Free State Garden in Bloemfontein, the Harold Porter Garden at Betty's Bay in the south-western Cape, the Drakensberg Garden at Harrismith, the Natal Garden at Pietermaritzburg and the Lowveld Garden at Nelspruit. Some of these were newly formed gardens while others were old established ones donated to Kirstenbosch. Indeed, Rycroft must have had

firsthand knowledge of the old garden in Pietermaritzburg from his early student days. Several additional gardens were in the pipeline when he retired, in particular the Witwatersrand Garden at Roodepoort.

The purpose of each regional garden is to grow, study and display the flora of its local area, not only for scientific and conservation goals but to acquaint the local public and visitors with the wonders of their flora. To this end the gardens have been an unqualified success. This South African concept of regional gardens concentrating exclusively on indigenous flora has been acknowledged as unique and has been acclaimed throughout the botanical and horticultural world. Rycroft was always pleased to discuss the policy of regional gardens with audiences who were eager to hear more about the organisation and the remarkable and diverse flora it catered for.

This leads to the second point referred to above, namely the advertising of the South African flora. While at Jonkershoek Forest Station, Rycroft arranged a few wild flower displays for the public. This idea went with him to Kirstenbosch and in his first year he persuaded the Botanical Society to hold its first flower show. However, this was a flower show with a difference: all the plants came from members's gardens. The show soon became a popular annual event and it continues to draw crowds of visitors.

Rycroft realised that these shows stimulated public interest in our flora and demonstrated that indigenous plants could be successfully cultivated. In more recent years the Botanical Society has organised sales of plants from Kirstenbosch's surplus stock—a very fruitful exercise financially as well as promotionally. It further vindicated Rycroft's convictions.

He was adamant that the name Kirstenbosch should be advertised as widely as possible in botanical circles and among the public. To this end he organised a very successful celebration in 1963 of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Kirstenbosch. A number of prominent overseas botanists, especially ones connected with botanic gardens, were brought to South Africa for the celebrations and subsequent tour of the country. These included Sir George Taylor, Director of the world famous Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Britain (Figure 3), and Prof. Richard Howard of the Arnold Arboretum, United States.

Rycroft always made a point of stimulating an interest among amateurs and the general public in the National Botanic Gardens and the flora as a whole. His role as roving ambassador for the Botanical Society will be remembered for a long time to come. He never forgot special occasions, such as the 90th birthday of Dr Louisa Bolus, the doyenne of botanists (Figure 4).

A remarkable 'propaganda' campaign was launched by the National Botanic Gardens for the recognition of our flora overseas. Almost every week boxes of proteas, leucospermums, ericas and other indigenous plants were flown to flower shows and other special events throughout the world and to the South African Embassies. The Kirstenbosch stand at the Chelsea Flower Show in London has been a highlight each year since 1977 and has been awarded many gold medals.



FIGURE 3.—Prof. H.B. Rycroft and Sir George Taylor, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, admiring a *Welwitschia* at Hortus Botanicus, Stellenbosch in 1963 on the occasion of the Kirstenbosch 50th Jubilee celebrations.

Rycroft found that our flowers are superb emissaries, ideally suited to breaking down political and language barriers. They also ensured a welcome for him in all the many countries he visited including the Soviet Union and Iran. At the 12th International Botanical Congress in Leningrad in 1975, I found the fine display of South African flowers sent over by Kirstenbosch to be a major focus of interest. Rycroft called our flowers 'South Africa's silent

ambassadors', whereas many came to regard him as 'our flora's talking ambassador'.

His regional gardens program and his stimulation of the horticulture of South African plants earned Rycroft awards from several bodies, of which the most notable was the Royal Horticultural Society of Britain which made him an Honorary Fellow in 1970 and one of their 13 vice-presidents in 1981. The R.H.S. also awarded him their Veitch Memorial Gold Medal in 1963, which is accorded to those who have helped to advance and improve the science and practice of horticulture. The awards culminated in the Decoration for Meritorious Service presented to him by State President Marais Viljoen in March 1980 (Figure 1). This is awarded to persons who have made exceptional contributions to South Africa.

In Cape Town Rycroft will be remembered for his 'battle of the roads'. Soon after arriving at Kirstenbosch he foresaw the undesirable situation of the main road passing through the garden and he persuaded the authorities to re-route it outside the main garden. But then in 1971 the City Engineer planned to upgrade the road to that of a 6-lane freeway on a massive bridge 3 m above ground right across the entrance to Kirstenbosch. Rycroft did not rest until the plan was squashed at the highest level, for which he mustered much local and international support. One piece of the saga was a cartoon in a local newspaper showing Rycroft in front of and defying a municipal bulldozer which was preparing to change the Kirstenbosch entrance. This resulted from a public statement he had made the day before in which he said he would obstruct any attempts by the City Council to do any damage to Kirstenbosch. In the book on Kirstenbosch (Rycroft & Ryan 1980) he gives an account of the successful battle.

While at Jonkershoek, Rycroft developed an interest in the family Proteaceae and began research on *Protea* and *Mimetes*, which he continued at Kirstenbosch. In 1960 he obtained a Royal Society and Nuffield Foundation Fellowship to study herbarium material in British herbaria. A supplementary grant from the Cape Tercentenary Fund enabled him to carry on this research on the Continent.



FIGURE 4.—Prof. Rycroft with Dr H.M.L. Bolus (Curator of the Bolus Herbarium, University of Cape Town, 1903–1955) on the occasion of her 90th birthday in 1967.

Dr John Rourke, in the introduction to his book on *Protea*, refers to the beginnings of a popular book in the early 1950's. Dr J.S. Beard had completed an account of the summer rainfall species, whereas Rycroft had hoped to deal with the winter rainfall species. To this end a few of the necessary illustrations had been prepared by artists Lura Ripley and Fay Anderson. In my student days I supplied Rycroft with field material of two species for painting, *Protea venusta* from the Swartberg and *Protea recondita* from the Cold Bokkeveld. The major stumbling block was the lack of an up-to-date comprehensive revision as a basis for the book. Due to overwhelming administrative pressure Rycroft gave up the struggle to continue this work and handed it over to a young member of staff, Dr John Rourke, who was actively involved with research in the family. The paintings were eventually used in Rourke's book which appeared in 1980.

Rycroft always retained an interest in taxonomy and encouraged research in this field. He prevailed upon the Trustees of the National Botanic Gardens to name the Compton Herbarium after its founder and shortly after that he gave the collection a major boost (Figure 5). During my student days he told me that he had been very concerned about the news that the Trustees of the South African Museum in Cape Town were considering giving up their botanical collections and transferring them to the State. He had gone to a meeting of the Trustees and had put forward a strong case for keeping the collections in Cape Town and offered to house them in the Compton Herbarium. This was accepted and so the oldest herbarium in southern Africa came on semipermanent loan to Kirstenbosch in 1956 together with its Curator, Dr Joyce Lewis (Figure 6). Only last year, on the 15th November 1990,



FIGURE 5. —Prof. Rycroft examining one of the pressed specimens in the Compton Herbarium.

was full ownership of the SAM Herbarium officially handed over to the Compton Herbarium during a function at which the fiftieth anniversary of the Compton Herbarium was celebrated.

The post of Director of the National Botanic Gardens holds with it the Harold Pearson Professorship of Botany at the University of Cape Town. This meant that Rycroft was involved with students in giving lectures on ecology during their third year.

One part of the course for students, which I attended in 1960, was the annual outing to look at Cape vegetation types at first hand, when Prof. Rycroft took the students on a camping trip during the short September vacation. These were unforgettable experiences, Rycroft in his little blue Kirstenbosch Opel station wagon and the students in the big Kirstenbosch lorry driven by Assistant Curator Alec Middlemost. During these trips Rycroft particularly loved showing the students the Knysna forests. The camps were enjoyable events with much revelry around the fire with special accompaniment from the prof on his mouth-organ.

I got to know Brian more intimately on several of these student trips and on a number of Kirstenbosch expeditions that I was invited to go on. It was then that I learnt of his back problem, which eventually led to two major operations. He also suffered from high blood pressure and alas all too frequently a 'raised elbow'. It amazed me that he managed to be involved in so many activities, including much travelling, without showing any signs of his physical problems.

Brian and Maureen Rycroft, had three children: Eric Brian, who is a professor of music at Stellenbosch and a well known conductor and viola player; Athol James, a building inspector in Mossel Bay and Anne Maureen, who plays the viola in the London Philharmonic Orchestra. The environment in which the children lived at Kirstenbosch was a very special one, unique in the Cape Town area.

Brian was divorced from Maureen in 1973 and married his second wife, Joan Gertrude. Joan owned a lovely fruit farm in the Banhoek Valley near Stellenbosch where many weekends were spent. A special nature reserve encompassing a patch of indigenous forest was set aside on the farm and named after Brian. It was opened by the Director-General of Forestry, Mr Danie Ackerman, in 1979. Unfortunately, however, the farm later had to be sold.

Rycroft retired as Director of the National Botanic Gardens at the end of July 1983 (Jackson 1983) and moved with Joan to the Natal South Coast where they lived at the beautiful Skyline estate formerly owned by Hugh Nicholson, who had retired to a nearby old-age village after donating the estate to the Borough of Uvongo. This estate and its wonderful arboretum was a joy for Brian to look after even though it entailed much hard work. At the same time he was appointed consultant to the Department of Forestry on the National Arboreta which required him to travel around the country. Unfortunately, towards the end of 1986, he was found to have lung cancer from which he recovered totally after an operation. At the commemoration of the founder during the 75th



FIGURE 6.—Prof. Rycroft and the Compton Herbarium Staff in the garden at Kirstenbosch in 1963. From left: Mrs N.M.E. Horrocks, Mrs L.I. Hall, Dr G.J. Lewis, Prof. H.B. Rycroft, Miss W.F. Barker (Curator), Mrs D.K. Fisher and Mrs I. Willment.

celebrations of Kirstenbosch in January 1988 it was my privilege to help him on the long procession to Pearson's grave, a walk undertaken with much effort on his part. His health forced him to resort to a more sedate life, which he found at the Hogsback. But even then there was no keeping him down and he set about developing the garden and helped out for a while at nearby Fort Hare University as head of geography.

Brian Rycroft died on 1 December 1990 in the East London Hospital where he was taken from his home in Hogsback after a mild stroke five days earlier.

A memorial service was held at the National Botanic Garden, Kirstenbosch, on 13 December 1990. Prof. M.C. Botha, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Botanical Institute (which includes the National Botanic Gardens) welcomed those present and the eulogy (Jackson 1990) was delivered by Prof. W.P.U. Jackson, President of the Botanical Society and a long-standing friend. The service was conducted by Bishop Amooore and the ashes were interred by Mrs Joan Rycroft next to the tree that Brian himself had planted on his retirement. The service was attended by his first wife Maureen, their children and grandchildren, many friends and former colleagues and the current staff of Kirstenbosch.

The final words of Prof. Jackson are a fitting tribute to a man who did so much for the South African flora. 'Above Pearson's grave in this garden you will read, *If Ye seek his monument, look around*. You can't do this for Brian Rycroft—you would have to travel to the four corners of the country to do that!'

Plants named after Rycroft:

Aspalathus rycroftii Dahlgren

Plants named by Rycroft:

Leucospermum arenarium Rycroft

Protea restionifolia (Salisb. ex Knight) Rycroft

Protea scorzonrifolia (Salisb. ex Knight) Rycroft
Protea pulchra Rycroft (= *P. burchellii* Stapf)

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