

OBITUARY

KATHLEEN DIXON GORDON-GRAY (NEÉ HUNTLEY) (1918–2012)

Kathleen Gordon-Gray passed away peacefully on 13 January 2012, eleven days before her 94th birthday. She is survived by her only daughter Celia.

Gordon-Gray was no ordinary person; she was in fact a most extraordinary and generous woman. Not only was she the South African expert in Cyperaceae and several other plant families occurring in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (see scholar.google.co.za for a list of some of her publications), but she was a wife, mother, and an excellent lecturer in the then Botany Department at the University of Natal (now UKZN) on the Pietermaritzburg campus. Gordon-Gray was also a much sought after confidant and friend to students and colleagues alike. It was her gentle and caring manner, ability to listen and her almost infinite patience and desire for perfection that were her enduring qualities. I never heard her speak ill of anyone and, if she had a fault, it was that she accepted her lowly academic status in the Department—as women often did in those days; foregoing promotion to realize her professional calling. Even to the last, wracked with arthritis, she was alert and working on Cyperaceae with Jane Browning and another of her close co-workers C.J. (Roddy) Ward, a well-known KZN plant collector and field ecologist (and ex-student from her earliest days as a Junior Lecturer).

Kath Gordon-Gray was born in Pietermaritzburg and graduated with a B.Sc. and M.Sc. (1939). Her Ph.D. was awarded in 1959 (all degrees from Natal University, now UKZN). After teaching at Girls Collegiate School (1940–1945), she was appointed in the Botany Department as a Junior Lecturer to teach mainly ex-service men; later as Lecturer (1951–1966 (Gunn & Codd 1981)) under Professor A.W.J. Bayer who was Head of Department at the time; as Senior Lecturer (1967–1976, after Professor Bayer retired); and finally as Associate Professor (1977–1978). She was, sadly, required by the regulations of the time, to retire at the age of 60 in 1978 (Glen & Germishuizen, 2010); but continued to work on her beloved KZN plants and the Cyperaceae in particular.

Gordon-Gray was essentially a ‘home’ girl, collecting some 4 000 specimens mainly from KZN. My fondest memories of her date back to the 1960s when the then Botany Department in Pietermaritzburg was arguably in its heyday. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a remarkable number of botanists passed through the Department (Moll 1987) and many undergraduates and postgraduates came under the spell of Doc G-G, as she was fondly known. Personally, if it had not been for Gordon-Gray, I would have become a zoologist and I know of many others who pursued a career in botany because of her influence. Thus, almost single-handedly, she recruited many people into botany who later became



FIGURE 1.—Three keen botanists sorting through live material of *Acacia robusta* in the herbarium that had been collected for leaf and pod measurements as part of a study to quantify the difference between the two subspecies of *A. robusta* subsp. *clavigera* and *robusta*. Left to right Eugene Moll, Kath Gordon-Gray, and Ken Tinley (Photographer: J.H. Ross).

well known in their particular fields, and who then went on themselves to recruit other botanists and ecologists. Some noteworthy students and colleagues until the 1980s were Don Killick, Roddy Ward, Denzil Edwards, Mike Wells, Clare Archer (Reid), Jim Ross, Fiona Getliffe, Roger Ellis, Charles Stirton, Esmé Hennessy, Ken Tinley, Brian Downing, Brian Huntley, Ed Granger, and Trevor Arnold.

One thing that she is well known for is her annotations on herbarium sheets, that are often accompanied by her meticulous drawings and notes of what she believed to be diagnostic features (for example see Goetghebeur & Coudijzer, 1985: 245), and on JSTOR some sheets such as the Type of *Fimbristylis bequaertii* De Willd. [Family Cyperaceae]; BR0000008639400, have illustrations by Gordon-Gray attached (J. Browning pers. comm. January 2012).

When she died, Gordon-Gray was still working on Cyperaceae with Jane Browning who compiled a comprehensive list of notes on her co-worker that she kindly shared with me. It was typical of Gordon-Gray to shun the lime-light. She was however belatedly awarded the South African Association of Botanists’ Silver Medal in 1998, though she certainly deserved greater recognition earlier in her career. As she disliked being photographed, pictures of her are rare and she shunned National and International Meetings; preferring to work alone and in close collaboration with those she knew and trusted. Yet, through her teaching and supervision, she was inspirational and provided sound theoretical and practical training in the fundamentals of taxonomy, anatomy, breed-

ing systems and the ecology of her beloved sedges and grasses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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