

OBITUARY

MARY DAVIDSON GUNN (1899–1989)

The death of Mary Gunn on 31 August 1989 marked the passing of the last of a trio known with affection in the South African botanical world as the Three Graces. Together with her colleagues, taxonomist Inez Verdoorn (1896–1989) and botanical artist Cythna Letty (1895–1985), Mary Gunn formed a remarkable team, each member of which left an indelible mark on their respective field of botany over a working period totalling more than 150 years.

Mary Gunn was born in Kerriemuir, Scotland on 15 May 1899 (Figure 1). Her father served in a Scottish regiment in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War and on returning home decided to immigrate to this country where he settled in Pretoria.

After attending the Gymnasium School, Mary Gunn joined the Division of Botany as a clerk with a 'knowledge of typing' as her letter of appointment indicates. It is clear from this letter that appointments were expeditiously executed at the time (Figure 2).

However, the new appointee was not constantly busy and to keep herself occupied, she would dismantle and examine the intricate workings of her wrist watch. Caught in the act by her sometimes irascible chief Dr Illtyd Buller Pole Evans, her immediate superior was instructed to give the young Scottish lass the books to take care of to fully utilize her working hours. This was to prove an inspired directive.

Mary was immediately interested in her new task although the collection of books was so small that there were not enough to fill even one shelf in the small room of the Division headquarters in 'Vredehuis' (Figure 3). On her return home each day she was enthusiastically encouraged by her father to describe each of the books she had catalogued. This daily ritual probably played a large part in the development of the remarkable memory which was to be one of her greatest attributes in the years to come.

The young librarian (Figure 4) with no formal training, was so excited by the world of botanical books to which she had so fortuitously been introduced that she began studying catalogues to establish which old works were available and how she could acquire them. She rapidly became an authority on old botanical literature and ascribed her future years of dedication largely to the pleasure derived from some of her first acquisitions. Heading the list was P.J. Bergius' *Descriptiones plantarum ex capite bonae spei*. This book, which was purchased in the 1920s from a German bookseller for a small sum, is inscribed W.H. Harvey 1838. But the real thrill about the acquisition was the fact that it had belonged to a young German, Georg Forster, who with his father had sailed on the 'Resolution' with Captain Cook on his second circumnavigation of the globe in 1772.

The delight of obtaining this type of Africana was to remain with Mary Gunn throughout her life. Many other noteworthy publications were to be purchased in the years to come. The majority of these early works were published privately and the limited copies were usually presented to patrons and friends. Colour printing was unknown and illustrations had to be hand-coloured in water colours. Fortunately Mary Gunn realized the value of works of this nature many years before it was generally appreciated in other parts of the world.

Because of very limited funds, various ways and means had to be devised to acquire these treasures and Mary frequently had to resort to her considerable persuasive powers to fulfil her wishes. In her own words 'I frequently had to go hat-in-hand asking for money from influential people so that I could buy what I wanted!'

Possibly one of the most notable and valuable works acquired was Redoute's *Les Liliacées*. The four volumes were purchased in England for £200 and transported to South Africa in the baggage of General J.C. Smuts after he had attended the signing of the treaty of Versailles in 1919. General Smuts was a great friend of Pole Evans and a frequent visitor to the Division of Botany.



FIGURE 1. — Mary Davidson Gunn (1899–1989).

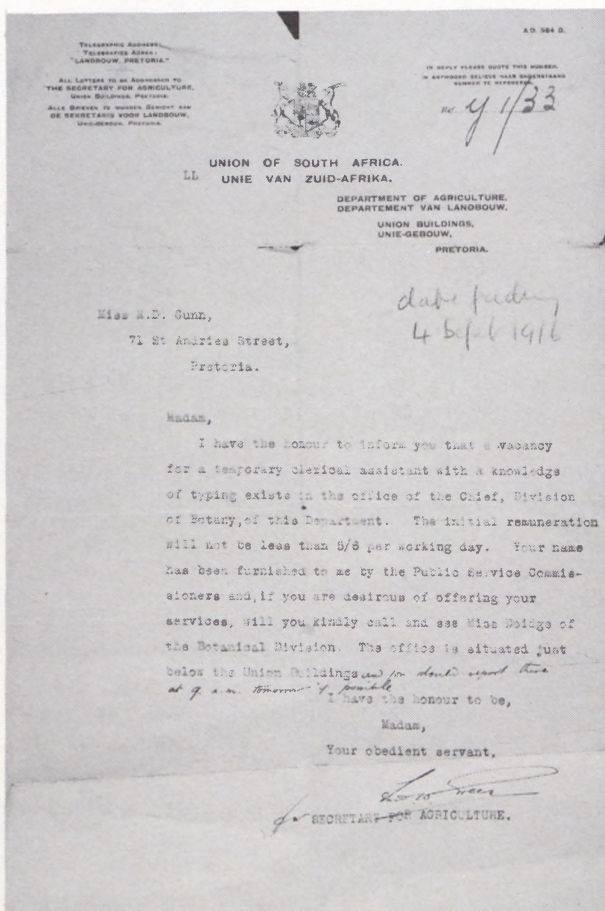


FIGURE 2.—Letter of appointment of Miss Gunn to the Division of Botany in September 1916.



FIGURE 4.—The young librarian.



FIGURE 3.—Women Staff—Botany & Plant Pathology, 1919. Back row L to R: Misses V. Bottomley, E. Tenant, K. Lansdell, A. Bottomley, Z. Findley, Dr E.M. Doidge, Miss S.M. Stent. Sitting L to R: Miss I. Verdoorn, Miss King, Mrs Stocks, Misses I. Tamblin, E. Linde, M.D. Gunn, K. Vos.

It is of interest to enumerate a few of the other, today almost priceless treasures which, through meticulous research and personal determination and endeavour, Mary Gunn was able to acquire for the library:

In G. Rondelletii ... *methodicam pharmaceuticum officinarum animadversiones* (1605) M. de l'Obel
Florilegium (1612) E. Sweet
Exoticarium plantarum (1670) J. Breyn

Horti medici amstelodamensis (1697–1701) J. Commelin
Plantae selectae (1750–1773) C.J. Trew
Geraniologia (1787–1788) C.L. L'Héritier
Icones plantarum rariorum (1781–86) and *Oxalis* (1794) N.J. Jacquin
The Botanists repository (1797–1815) H.C. Andrews (Figure 5)
Medicinal plants of the Cape (1857) C.W.L. Pappe

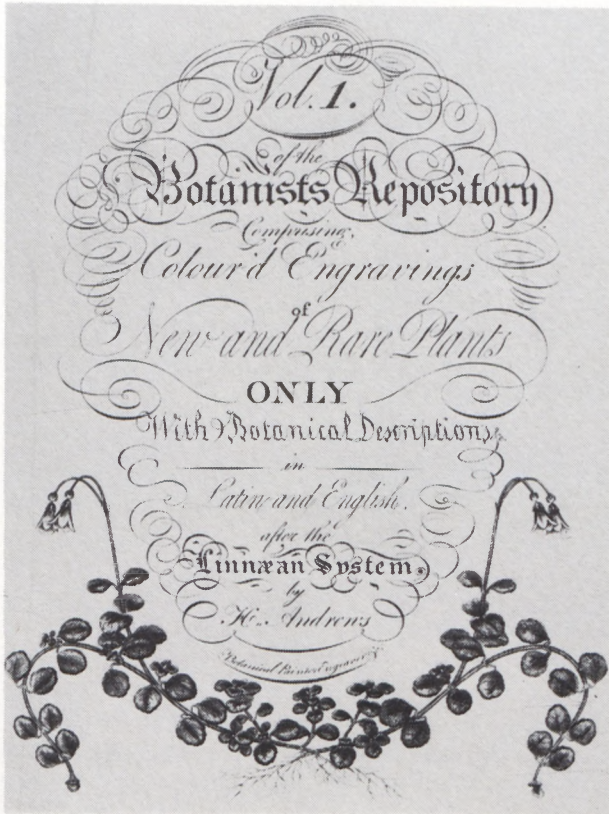


FIGURE 5. —Title page of the *Botanists Repository*, one of the priceless treasures in the Mary Gunn Library.

Genera of South African plants (1838) Harvey, generally considered to be the first scientific work published in South Africa. This book, purchased in Johannesburg for ± R9,00 is of special interest as it contains handwritten notes by the author.

Notable series acquired included a full set of *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* published from 1790 onwards and the exceptionally valuable Loddiges' *Botanical Cabinet*. These beautiful leather-bound, gold-leaf-edged volumes were

purchased personally by Mary Gunn in England before 1939 and held by the booksellers until the end of World War 2 when they could be safely delivered to Pretoria.

Dr Illtyd Pole Evans, chief of the Division of Botany from 1913 to 1939 had a profound influence on the botanical fields in which he became involved and he similarly influenced and inspired many of his staff. His continual queries about botanical explorers led Mary Gunn into her second field of specialization, namely biographical research of early botanists. Information about travellers such as Thunberg, Burchell, Masson, Ecklon and many more was diligently collected from all corners of the globe. A cherished ambition was finally realized in 1981 when the major part of all this information was used for the publication *Botanical exploration in southern Africa*. This work, produced in collaboration with her one-time chief Dr Leslie Codd, was the culmination of more than 65 years of research.

In spite of her redoubtable knowledge this was to be her only really significant personal publication. With Enid du Plessis she introduced and edited *The Flora capensis of Jakob and Johann Philipp Breyne*. This was a publication of original 17th and 18th century water-colour drawings contained in an album which is one of the Africana treasures of H.F. Oppenheimers's Brenthurst Collection.

Apart from these two works her publications were limited to tributes or notes on botanical colleagues or personalities. She had always hoped to publish an account of the adventurous Colonel Robert Gordon who was commandant of the Dutch Garrison at the Cape from 1780 until 1795 when he committed suicide after surrendering to the British. The history of this colourful soldier and naturalist was particularly dear to her heart. When she realized, in her eighties, that she would never be able to utilize her information it was passed on to other historians. This assistance was acknowledged by Raper and Boucher in their two volumes on Gordon which were published in 1988. Her generosity in passing on the results of a



FIGURE 6. —Official opening of the Mary Gunn Library, 15th January 1970. From left to right: Dr B. de Winter, Deputy Director, Botanical Research Institute; Dr J.W. Geyer, Chief Director of Research, Department of Agriculture; Miss M.D. Gunn and Dr L.E. Codd, Director, B.R.I.



FIGURE 7.—View of the Mary Gunn Library.

lifetime of research was one of the most noteworthy attributes of this remarkable woman. Numerous publications such as *Aloes of South Africa* (Reynolds), *Trees of southern Africa* (Palmer) and *There was a man* (Gutsche) bear witness to this quality.

In dedicating Volume 32 of *The Flowering Plants of Africa* series to Mary Gunn in 1957/58, editor Dr Leslie Codd writes: Librarian, authority on Africana, who during her 40 years of service in the Department of Agriculture, has with unrelenting devotion built up a comprehensive botanical library in the Division of Botany, who has assisted so many research workers in tracing literature relevant to their problems and who has since its inception fostered the best interests of 'The Flowering Plants of Africa'.

After retiring officially in 1954 she continued working in a temporary capacity until 1973 but until a few years before her death she still enjoyed spending a few hours a week in the privacy of her office. Here she would peruse her personal collection of books and be available to readily offer advice or search for information for anyone who needed her expertise.

In 1976 she was honoured with the award of The Bolus Medal which recognizes outstanding achievement in the field of botany by those without formal training in this field of science. But her highest honour was undoubtedly the dedication of the Mary Gunn Library in 1969 (Figure 6). It was a fitting tribute and now stands as a memorial to someone who virtually single-handedly built up the library (Figure 7) and served it with devotion and distinction for almost 60 years.

Mary Gunn possessed charm, coupled with a sharp, sometimes caustic wit, a sense of humour, steely determination and a high regard for those she felt warranted respect. These qualities were admired by many who knew her personally or who had corresponded with her. Although quite happy to live alone she enjoyed good company and was a loyal and loving friend to those dear to her.

Tributes to Mary's colleagues Inez and Cythna closed with quotations from the latter's book of poems *Children of the hours*. No suitable quotation from that work could be found to close this tribute to the last of the Three Graces, but what could be more apt than fellow Scot Thomas Carlyle's words:

'All that mankind has done, thought, gained or been: it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books. They are the chosen possession of men.'

PUBLICATIONS OF M.D. GUNN

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 - 1970a. J.W. Bews. *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa* 2: 301.
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 - 1971a. A. Dieterlen. *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa* 4: 38.
 - 1971b. M.K. Dinter. *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa* 4: 41–42.
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- CODD, L.E. & GUNN, M.D. 1979. Plant collecting pioneers in the Barberton area. *Veld & Flora* 65: 98–101.
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 - 1982b. The collecting activities of Anton Rehmann (1840–1917) in South Africa. *Bothalia* 14: 1–14.
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 - 1984a. J.D.C. Lamb and the 'Herbarium Lambii'. *Veld & Flora* 70: 62–63.
 - 1984b. Some more notes on plant collectors. *Veld & Flora* 70: 67–68.
 - 1985a. Additional biographical notes on plant collectors in southern Africa. *Bothalia* 15: 631–654.
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