

OBITUARY

ROBERT ALLEN DYER (1900–1987)

With the death of Dr R. A. Dyer in Johannesburg on 26 October 1987, South Africa lost one of its leading and most respected plant taxonomists. His personal contribution to South African botany was considerable and, under his wise guidance as Director from 1944 to 1963, the Botanical Research Institute grew in stature and productivity.

Robert Allen Dyer (Figure 1) was born in Pietermaritzburg on 21 September 1900 and was educated at Merchiston and Michaelhouse schools in Natal. From 1919 to 1923 he attended Natal University College, graduating with the degree of M.Sc. under Professor J. W. Bews.

After a year as research worker with the Natal Sugar Association, he was appointed in 1925 to the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology in the Department of Agriculture. The Chief of the Division was then Dr I. B. Pole Evans (Figure 2) who, in 1918, had brought together the leading botanical personalities, including men such as Bews, Marloth and Schonland, into a Botanical Survey Advisory Committee, to co-ordinate the various research activities concerning the country's flora. Allen Dyer was placed as assistant to Professor Schonland in Grahamstown and may therefore be regarded as the first botanical survey officer to be appointed. After Schonland's retirement in 1926, he was put in charge of the survey of the eastern Cape and became Honorary Curator of the Albany Museum Herbarium.

During his stay in Grahamstown he undertook a detailed survey of the vegetation of the Albany and Bathurst Districts, which later earned him the degree of D.Sc. from the University of South Africa and which was published as *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* No. 17 (1937). It was also during this period that he came in contact with the rich succulent flora of the eastern Cape, which directed much of his later research work towards groups such as the succulent Euphorbieae, Stapelieae and Crassulaceae.

From 1931 to 1934 he served as South Africa's liaison officer at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he made several life-long friends. On his return he was stationed in the National Herbarium, Pretoria. In 1944 he succeeded Dr E. P. Phillips (Figure 3) as Chief of the Division of Botany (later renamed the Botanical Research Institute) and Director of the Botanical Survey.

Under his wise and determined guidance, the Institute showed a revival in activity and growth. One of his first achievements was to re-activate the botanical survey by obtaining the creation of four posts, thus forming for the first time, an official Botanical Survey Section within the Institute which, among other results, made possible the production of the Veld Type map by J. P. H. Acocks. This is probably the most frequently quoted ecological publication in South Africa, with wide implications in other fields, such as pasture management, land-use planning, nature conservation and zoological research.

His influence was also felt in the stimulus of taxonomic and herbarium activities. The increased survey

work brought pressure to bear on the National Herbarium and resulted in a useful symbiosis. Additional staff were required for identifying the flow of specimens, while the herbarium staff had greater facilities for field work connected with their taxonomic problems. His vision of a 'pan-African botanical policy' was put forward in his presidential address to Section C of the S. African Association for the Advancement of Science in 1942 and steps were taken to acquire collections from tropical African countries south of the Sahara. In 1956, following negotiations with the Transvaal Museum, their important herbarium was transferred to the National Herbarium. In 1960 the regional units, which had already been established at Durban, Grahamstown and Kimberley, were added to when Stellenbosch University agreed to their herbarium being placed under State control.

The restricted area for the cultivation of indigenous plants at the Institute's headquarters in Pretoria resulted in a search for a more suitable site and, as a result of negotiations with the Pretoria University Agricultural Faculty initiated in 1945, an ideal site for a botanic garden, consisting of about 60 ha of the University Experimental Farm east of Pretoria, was acquired. The land was later purchased by the Government, together with certain private properties between the northern boundary of this area and the Silverton road, resulting in a unit with inherent scenic properties and varying micro-climates. It also provided an appropriate site for a new building for the Institute which Dr Dyer started planning



FIGURE 1.—Dr R. A. Dyer (1900–1987).



FIGURE 2.—Drs R. A. Dyer, I. B. Pole Evans and John Hutchinson in Pretoria, ± 1953.

in 1950, but which materialized only several years after his retirement as Director.

During his term of office as Director, Dr Dyer edited the Institute's publications, *Bothalia*, *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* and *Flowering Plants of Africa*. In addition he obtained the support of the Department of Agriculture for the publication of an inventory and description of our flora in a series entitled

Flora of southern Africa. The first volume, to which he contributed the Myrsinaceae, Primulaceae and Plumbaginaceae, appeared in 1963. He also showed great shrewdness in managing an independent fund, which he had succeeded in creating, for the purchase of rare books for the library without recourse to tender, something almost unheard of in the public service.

After reaching the official retiring age in 1963, he was re-appointed in a temporary capacity and served the Institute for a further sixteen years, finally retiring in 1979. By this time he had over 450 scientific publications to his credit, more than 300 of which were texts for *Flowering Plants of Africa*. Probably his best known publication is *The Succulent Euphorbieae*, in two volumes with numerous habitat photographs taken by himself, produced in collaboration with White & Sloane in 1941. In the following year, all three authors received the award of the Senior Capt. Scott Medal by the South African Biological Society. Other major revisions dealt with *Cyrtanthus* (*Herbertia* 6: 65–103, 1940), *Brunsvigia* (*Plant Life* 6: 63–83, 1950; 7: 45–64, 1951) and *Zamiaceae* (*Bothalia* 8: 405–515, 1965, and, together with I. C. Verdoorn, in *Flora of southern Africa* 1: 3–34, 1966. Figure 4). One of the main tasks which occupied him during his retirement was the complete rewriting of Phillips's *Genera* under the title of *The Genera of Southern African Flowering Plants* (Figure 5) in two volumes (1975, 1976, the latter volume, dealing with Monocotyledons, in collaboration with A. A. Obermeyer). This was an undertaking which only a person with his wide experience could undertake and on which he left his personal stamp. Even after his final retirement, he continued with his studies, dealing with the genera *Ceropegia*, *Brachystelma* and *Riocrexia* in *Flora of southern Africa* 27,4 (1980) and in a more popular, well illustrated account in 1983.

Dr Dyer was a staunch supporter of local scientific societies and was the recipient of their major awards. His work was also internationally recognized and respected. He was elected Fellow of the Cactus and Succulent



FIGURE 3.—Three former directors of the B.R.I.: centre, Dr E. P. Phillips (1939–1944); left, Dr R. A. Dyer (1944–1963); right, Dr L. E. Codd (1963–1973) on the occasion of Dr Dyer's retirement in 1963.



FIGURE 4.—Dr Dyer examining *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn in the Transvaal Waterberg, May 1947.

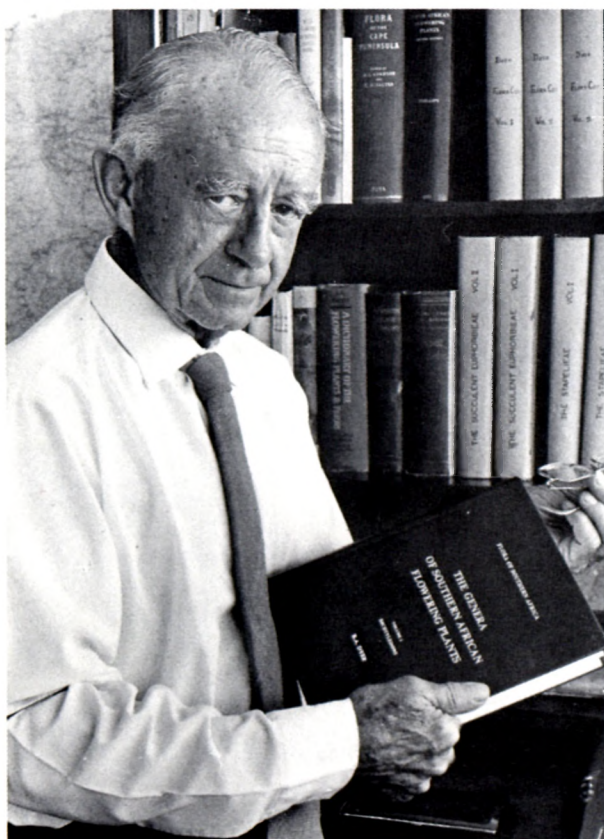


FIGURE 5.—In his office on completion of his *Genera* (1976). Photo: Pretoria News.

Society of America in 1941 and Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa in 1944. After receiving the Senior Capt. Scott Memorial Medal from the South African Biological Society in 1942, he was President of the Society in 1948 and President of the South African Asso-

ciation for the Advancement of Science in 1960, having received their medal in 1951. In 1948 he was awarded the medal of the American Amaryllis Society and in 1954 the medal of the Botanical Society of France. The Gold Medal of the South African Association of Botanists was awarded to him in 1973 and, in 1976, Witwatersrand University conferred on him an honorary D.Sc. degree in recognition of his contributions to South African botany.

He collected over 6 000 specimens, many of which are supported by excellent field photographs. About 200 of these are from the island of Tristan da Cunha, which he visited in 1937. He is commemorated in the generic name *Radyera* Bullock and in several species names including *Aridaria dyeri* N.E. Br., *Delosperma dyeri* L. Bol., *Hereroa dyeri* L. Bol., *Eriospermum dyeri* Archibald and *Agapanthus dyeri* Leighton.

Dr Dyer was essentially a modest person but was possessed of great determination and perseverance. He lived a full life with many interests and it was typical of him that, whatever he undertook, he went into wholeheartedly and was prepared to devote his time and gifts of leadership to the furtherance of his objectives. Unlike many botanists, he was a keen grower of plants and, with his usual enthusiasm, served on the committee of the Pretoria Horticultural Society for over thirty years, ten of which were as President. By his integrity and sincerity he inspired the loyalty and esteem of his staff, and he will be remembered with affection and respect by his wide circle of friends and colleagues. He is survived by his daughter Rosemary and his two sons Michael and Tristan, and their families, to whom our sincere sympathy is extended.