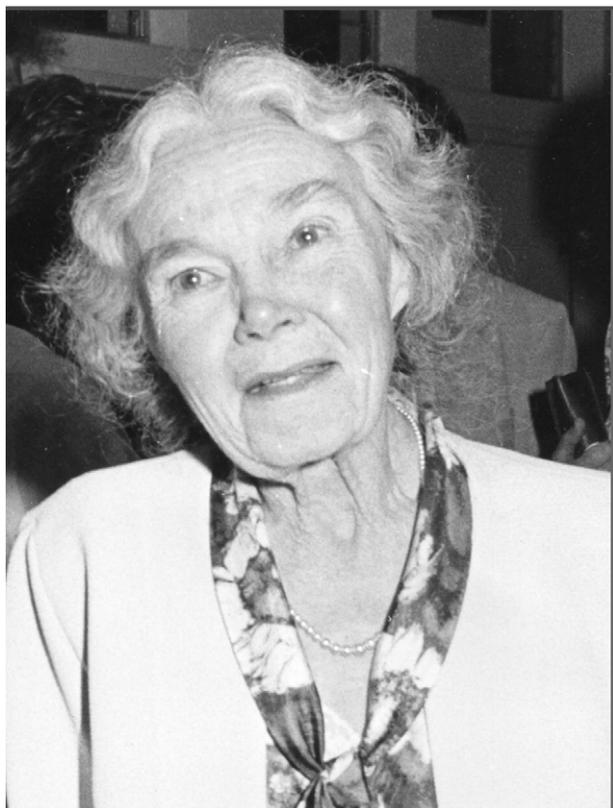


Obituary

Kathleen Dixon Gordon-Gray (née Huntley) — Kath

Born 24th January 1918, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
Died 13th January 2012, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa



“...she seemed to embody the true spirit of academic integrity, and this gave her an unassuming and modest grace that is rare and precious indeed”

Kathleen Dixon Gordon-Gray (née Huntley) was born on 24th January, 1918 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa and died there on 13th January, 2012. She was educated at the Girls' High School and the Natal University College of the University of South Africa, Pietermaritzburg which in 1949, together with the later-established Durban campuses of NUC became the University of Natal. For her Bachelor's degree in 1937 she offered Botany and Chemistry as major subjects, with Physics and Zoology as ancillaries. Childhood visits to an aunt, who lived on a farm in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains

had kindled her life-long interest in plants. In 1939 she was awarded a M.Sc. degree in Botany, followed in 1959 by a Ph.D.

From 1940 to 1945 she taught Biology at the Girls' Collegiate School. In 1946 she was appointed as Herbarium Assistant and then, in 1951, after the death of the then Senior Lecturer, Dr Beryl Fisher, she was appointed Lecturer in the Department of Botany at the University of Natal. From 1967 to 1976 she held the post of Senior Lecturer and from 1977 until her retirement in 1978 was Associate Professor. Under the South African legal system retirement at the age of 60 was obligatory for women employed in state-funded or partly state-funded institutions.

Until about 1965 she was able to undertake fieldwork and collected approximately 4000 specimens which are lodged in South African Herbaria, mainly in NU with replicates in GRA, NH and PRE. A fall when she was four years old had caused an impacted femur which was neither diagnosed nor treated at the time and which in later years severely restricted her physical mobility. She never lacked for material with which to work, however, as her needs were willingly supplied by fellow botanists, students and friends.

After her enforced retirement, Kath, as she was known to her friends, continued her research and recorded some of her detailed knowledge of the flora of Natal and adjacent areas. This culminated in the publication of “Cyperaceae of Natal” in 1995. Up until a few days before her death she was still engaged, in collaboration with other botanists, notably Dr. Jane Browning, a taxonomist, and Mr. C.J. (“Roddy”) Ward, an ecologist, in the preparation of joint articles for publication.

She was awarded the Senior (Silver) Medal of the South African Association of Botanists in 1998 in recognition of her outstanding contribution to Botanical Science in South Africa. Her major publications up to that time concerned the taxonomy of Cyperaceae, Poaceae, *Acacia* and *Cassia* although her interests and expertise extended into many vascular plant families and several fields, notably Palaeobotany.

In response to notification of her death, many former colleagues, former students and friends have sent letters expressing their esteem for a much respected, greatly admired and much loved woman. Unfortunately it is not feasible to reproduce all the letters here.

A former Head of the Botany Department, Professor Chris Bornman, wrote: “Kath Gordon-Gray was not only a meticulous scientist but she was a warm-hearted and sympathetic colleague who always had a welcoming space in her study which was usually

crammed to capacity with botanical specimens, reprints and papers in preparation. For me, among her outstanding contributions was the work that she, Eddie van Dijk and W. S. Lacey did on the *Glossopteris* flora from Natal, first published in 1974 in the *South African Journal of Science* and later in other journals such as *Science* and *Palaeobotanist*, confirming that the rocks from the Mooi River area containing these 235-million-year-old fossils were once part of the great southern continent of Gondwana”.

What is obvious when scrutinizing the messages now being received from all over the world, are both the great respect for Kath as a scientist, felt by all who knew her work, and in addition, the love and admiration of those who knew her personally, for a warm, caring and generous woman.

To those who are fortunate to be numbered among her former students she provided sound theoretical and practical training in some of the fundamentals of taxonomy such as principles of nomenclature, phylogeny, morphogenesis, breeding systems, the population dynamics etc. of living organisms. Her enthusiasm for her chosen discipline was infectious and induced many of her students to embrace careers in the biological sciences. After all, what could be more fun than participation in the study of life itself, or “The Greatest Show on Earth” as Dawkins (2009) so aptly designated it? So great was her enthusiasm for plant taxonomy that when she retired she donated a sum of money to the Department of Botany to provide a prize each year to the most promising student of Biosystematics.

Although most of her more-recent publications dealt with various aspects of Cyperology, to characterize her solely as a Cyperologist is to underestimate her. Hers was a formidable intellect, fuelled by insatiable curiosity, acute powers of observation

and finely-honed analytical skills. She certainly did not limit the application of her skills to a single group of plants. Generations of students, laymen and professional botanists owe much to her for innumerable plant identifications which she ungrudgingly undertook on their behalf.

She was very shrewd in her assessment of people’s capabilities and demanded their best from her students. If a student did not produce work of an acceptable standard she did not hesitate to reprimand him/her. Understandably she expected of others what she expected of herself — the best they could deliver. She was intolerant, and rightly so, of sloppy work, superficial observation and shallow reasoning.

To all those of her students who “made it” in their professions she was and will continue to be, an inspiration. All who knew her have been enriched by her life. May the Elysian Fields provide more sedges than asphodel for her enjoyment. *vale* Kath.

Kathleen Gordon-Gray was predeceased by her husband, Dr Claude Gordon Gordon-Gray, a senior lecturer in chemistry at the University of Natal who had been engaged in research on the alkaloids in the genus *Senecio* in South Africa, and is survived by their daughter Celia Gordon-Gray to whom we offer sincere condolences.

With gratitude to many people, particularly Jane Browning, Roddy Ward and Christina Potgieter for some of the information.

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