



Dr Winifred Mary Curtis

100 years of botanical research, teaching and travelling

Exhibition opening speech by Gintaras Kantvilas - June 2005

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Notes from the Opening of an exhibition of the same name at the University of Tasmania, June 2005.

by Gintaras Kantvilas

...the Dover mail...lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He walked uphill in the mire by the side of the mail, as the rest of the passengers did; not because they had the least relish for walking exercise...but because the hill, and the harness, and the mud, and the mail were all so heavy, that the horses had three times already come to a stop...with the mutinous intent of taking it back to Blackheath.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859.

Only about 50 years later, the Curtis family came to live at the top of Shooter's Hill in Charlton, London. Horses and carts still rumbled up the hill, and the bus couldn't make it because it was too steep, so the passengers had to walk. Unlike the urban landscape it is today, it was semi-rural, and a young Winifred played in the nearby fields with the local children. She was an only child.

The First World War came and she had vivid memories of a Zeppelin being shot down over East London. The war, however, had a far greater impact on her life later, because it was her generation that was literally culled of men. In later life, when asked why she had remained unmarried, she simply replied "there weren't the men; they were all killed in the war."

In her childhood, the family moved frequently and one particularly memorable interlude in her childhood was living in India and going to school in the town of Nani Tal in the foothills of the Himalayas near the border with Nepal. She returned to London in 1922 to complete her matriculation.

Botany seeped into her life only slowly, more by virtue of her doing well at it rather than through any specific love or vocation. However, it brought her prizes which paid for fees to attend University College in London. Her early training was at the hands of some of Britain's greatest botanists – people whom today we may know of only as authors of dusty, discontinued textbooks. For example, Francis Oliver, the palaeobotanist who first discovered fossils of the Pteridosperms - the ancient fern-like seed-bearing progenitors of modern seed plants. There were also the pioneer plant ecologists Sir Edward Salisbury and Arthur Tansley, and Winifred was a foundation member of that now illustrious body, the British Ecological Society. Other teachers included the great phycologist Felix Fritsch and the mycologist Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan. It is an amazing pedigree but perhaps not so unusual in Science, where the student receives the light of knowledge from their teacher, and where one sees far only because one has stood on the shoulders of giants.

In that respect, Winifred imported this Botanical tradition to Tasmania. Today, many Tasmanian botanists have been taught by the late Bill Jackson and his contemporaries, who themselves were students of Winifred.

One of her first pieces of scientific research was conducted in England in her spare time whilst teaching high school biology. This was on the plant we now know as *Spartina anglica*, or rice grass. In Tasmania, it occurs as an introduced weed on mud flats such as on the Tamar River. In Europe, it is a major plant of intertidal flats and is used for stabilising polders. It was Winifred who first recognised the hybrid origin of this plant and published her findings in 1937. More than sixty years later, the Tasmanian Herbarium was hosting a visiting Belgian ecologist working on wetlands. He was familiar with the historical discoveries of Curtis, so you can imagine how excited he was when led down the corridor to meet the lady herself. He knew of her only as the author of a famous paper, and never imagined her not only alive but at the other end of the world, in Tasmania! And still working!

Winifred's arrival in Tasmania was also rather fortuitous. In retirement, her father sought a better climate and decided to emigrate to one of the British dominions. After spreading out a map of the world, the Curtis family short-listed Tasmania, New Zealand and Vancouver. Winifred wrote to the Universities, and the most promising reply was from Tasmania – from Professor V.V. Hickman. On arrival in Hobart in September 1939, she gained a job as part-time demonstrator at the University of Tasmania's newly instigated Botany Department and, soon after, a part-time job teaching science at Fahan School.

The Second World War now played a hand in her life's journey, for in 1943, the Australian Government decided it needed more doctors, and medical students had to study Botany in the early part of their training. So Winifred was offered a full-time position at the University. With a brand new Botany Department, there was nobody available to teach Botany at University level, other than this young, newly arrived English woman.

Winifred's subsequent work in Tasmania needs little elaboration for an account of this has been published elsewhere ¹. She adapted her studies of chromosomes in Rice Grass and other English plants to the Tasmanian flora, and these were the first cytological investigations of any native Tasmanian species. Fed up with being forced to use English-orientated science text books, she wrote her own: *Biology for Australian Students*. Ironically, it was not published in time for her to teach from it herself.

She taught botany to an entire generation of Tasmanian university students and, although she had a reputation to be rather exacting and formidable, she clearly had a great love for her students and earned their long-lasting respect in return. In later life, she still corresponded with many of them, and would proudly comment that some prominent public figure in professional or academic life was 'one of hers'. She has continued to receive regular letters and visits from her ex-students throughout her life.

Her professional achievements also included the magnificent, six-volume *Endemic Flora of Tasmania*, undertaken jointly with botanical artist Margaret Stones and sponsored by Lord Talbot de Malahide.

Her greatest legacy to Tasmania, however, is her *Students Flora* which still serves as the fundamental text on Tasmania's flowering plants and conifers. The project commenced in the 1940's, and the first volume was published in 1956. The fifth and final volume appeared only in 1994. The last volumes were published jointly with her very dear friend and close collaborator, Dennis Morris.

My personal association with Winifred commenced only in 1988 when I came to work at the Herbarium where Winifred had been Honorary Botanist since her retirement from the University in 1966. Of course, even as undergraduates in the 70's, we all knew her, and would note with some indulgent smiles as she would ever so carefully park her Peugeot car in the Department car park before heading off to work in the Herbarium (then housed upstairs in the Botany Department). I subsequently learned that this was not indicative of her general driving style, and that she had once returned a new car to a dealer because it didn't go as fast as the brochure claimed. As undergraduates, we were rather fearful of 'Winnie', because if she passed by when you had a plant in your hand, she would ask you what it was, and if you didn't know, she would instruct you to key it out. After all, this was the little old lady who had once marched into Professor Jackson's office and was heard to loudly declare "smarten yourself up, son". What about we never knew, because Prof then got up and closed his door.

The decision to publish a collection of papers in her honour 2 brought us closer together. The tradition of the 'Festschrift' is strong in Europe, particularly in the Germanic countries, and Winifred's 85 th birthday was approaching. Tony Orchard, then Head of the Herbarium, and I worked to solicit papers and sponsorship. We eventually had contributions from more than thirty authors – past and present colleagues of Winifred, former students and admirers. The Royal Society of Tasmania published the book in 1991.

One of my tasks was to prepare a biography which was based on long conversations – they were hardly interviews – with Winifred. I was totally deflated when Winifred greeted the first draft of my story of her life with comments like "really quite awful" and "how could you possibly have it so wrong". However, the draft came back to me with only a few dates and minor points corrected – such was her adherence to correctness and propriety.

Dennis Morris' involvement with Winifred is a most significant chapter in this story. It is their friendship that saw the later volumes of her Flora through to publication, and as advancing years took their toll on her, Dennis' role grew from amanuensis to co-worker to essentially project leader. Winifred may have been the public face of the Flora and in receipt of most the accolades, but she would be the first to give Dennis recognition for his critical role in the work. Their interactions were vibrant and full of fun – the austere Victorian lady and the rather larrikin assistant with a great sense of fun. The Herbarium would resound with their interchanges, punctuated with peals of laughter. Winifred would be offering her opinion in her firmest, most determined manner, with Dennis interjecting with "quite so, Winifred, quite so". In 1989, some of Dennis' reminiscences included 3:

"I first heard about her when I was a ranger at Mount Field. There was a dunny up there people called Winifred. It was a tin one at one of the huts up at Dobson. They had rather rickety old wooden ones and Winifred complained bitterly and so they bought a pre-fab metal one which stood up there. Winifred's never afraid to contact authority if she thought something needed to be done or needed to be changed."

"I suppose we're similar sorts of people...She's a friend of us all, a wonderful friend...and a wonderful woman. If there were more people like Winifred, the world would be a better place."

"She's a good stick and I admire her rectitude and her principle which she doesn't depart from...Winifred thinks there are principles to which we should subscribe and stick to as much as we can. She says she is a theoretical socialist. That the theory of socialism...is what people should adhere to but it's obvious people aren't good enough for socialism. It doesn't work because of human fallibility...She's very tolerant but she doesn't think that everyone is what they should be..."

Although she was so single minded and dedicated to her task, the breadth of her interests was astounding. Discussions with her on the philosophy of the non-conformist churches and on the writings of Karel Capek (a particular favourite) were as spirited and memorable as those on plants.

Winifred continued working actively and regularly at the Herbarium up until about 2000. Perhaps her 'final' working appearance was hosting a visit to the Herbarium by members from her club, the Queen Mary Club in Hobart. Naturally all the staff were involved in some way and made their short presentations. Winifred personally gave a short talk on, of all things, lower plants – the one group she never ever really studied. However, she had issued instructions on what she needed, and fresh mosses and liverworts had been collected for the occasion. She gave her talk and went home. Her subsequent visits, punctuated by bouts of ill health and increasing frailty, were social only.

Sadly, as her 100th year approaches, Winifred is unable to attend functions away from her home. It is a great pity, but I am perhaps relieved, as otherwise this account would surely have had to be severely vetted and corrected. Those who knew her in her working years can remember her fondly as botanist, teacher and friend. For those who did not have the privilege to meet her, this short article will hopefully offer some insights into the grand lady of Tasmanian botany.

References

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From unpublished transcripts of taped conversations with the author, conducted in Hobart in 1989.