

MISS MARY GUNN was born in Scotland in 1899 and at an early age emigrated to South Africa to join her parents who had settled in Pretoria. In September 1916 after leaving school she entered the public service working in the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology as a typist. The chief of the division, Dr. I. B. Pole Evans, soon delegated the task of building up a library for the division to the young Mary Gunn; this she did with great competence and enthusiasm. At the time of her official retirement in 1954 the Botanical Research Institute (successor to the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology) library was the most comprehensive botanical library in Africa.

Mary Gunn's two fields of specialisation are biographical research on early botanists and old botanical literature, and she soon became a leading authority in both. Her researches into the lives of early and obscure plant collectors have led her to many interesting contacts and discoveries. Three in particular still give her pleasure today:

- While investigating the life of Col. R. J. Gordon, Miss Gunn contacted and corresponded with many people all over the world. Among her correspondents was Prince Franz-Josef of Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst, who had in his archives manuscripts on the Gordon family. During their correspondence it even transpired that Miss Gunn and the Prince had a common Gun(n) ancestor. In keeping with her warm-hearted, generous nature Mary Gunn sent the Prince and his family food parcels throughout the war!

Although Gordon was known to have had a home in Cape Town it had long been assumed that the famous residence had disappeared. With Gunnian tenacity Mary sold her personal copy of *Burchell's Travels*, purchased an air ticket and set off to Cape Town to find the Gordon house. Need it be said that after many hours in the archives as well as tramping hot streets Mary Gunn found "Schoonder-Zicht" in the Gardens, half the name still clearly visible on the gate post!

- While her friend the late Prof. J. P. R. Wallis was working on the life of Thomas Baines in the 1930's, he casually asked Mary if she knew anything about a portfolio of flower paintings which Baines mentioned in his diary as having been executed by Captain (later Major) Edward Rooper of Fort Glamorgan. She immediately set to work and contacted many branches of the Rooper family eventually tracing the descendants to Guildford. There was however no trace of the flower paintings. The end of the story is clearly revealed in the following extracts from a letter dated 19th February 1956 to Miss Gunn from J. R. Rooper of Guildford:

# Mary Gunn



"At the end of your letter of 2nd February 1954 you say: 'I still hope one day that Major Rooper's portfolio of flower paintings will turn up and it is just possible it may be lying forgotten in some library'. I am now delighted to be able to tell you that the miraculous has happened! The other day a female cousin of mine named Cecily Dakeyne died unmarried at the age of about 70. Amongst her possessions were found the missing portfolio!"

The historic Major Rooper album is now with many other treasures in the Mary Gunn Library of the Botanical Research Institute, Pretoria.


- Today after many years of retirement Mary Gunn still exercises her uncanny ability to "find out about people". In 1974 a request from the University of California, Berkeley, for particulars about collectors of Cape marine algae was addressed to Miss Gunn; it did not take her long to discover that many of the hitherto unknown personalities were lighthouse keepers in the Cape!

Miss Gunn's second great interest in early botanical literature is tied in closely

with her historical and biographical interests. With the help of Dr. Pole Evans, Mary Gunn ruthlessly extracted funds from interested and generous benefactors in South Africa. These funds enabled her to purchase many of the priceless volumes which are housed in the Mary Gunn Library. Today she is recognised as a leading authority not only on early botanical literature but on all Africanana.

Many authors writing on historical subjects are deeply indebted to Mary Gunn for assistance in their researches. More often than not a keen researcher will set out to work on an "unknown" visitor to the Cape, will consult Miss Gunn and a few hours later leave having had a wealth of pertinent information revealed to them about their "unknown" personality. Throughout the country she is known for the generosity with which she gives advice and assistance to researchers and students.

A fitting tribute in 1970 was the re-naming of the Botanical Research Institute Library as the Mary Gunn Library in honour of its creator.

After her retirement Mary Gunn was employed in a part-time capacity by the Botanical Research Institute to supervise the library. Miss Gunn still enjoys good health and is daily to be found in the office which has been put at her disposal in the Institute. She is currently compiling an index of deceased South African botanical collectors with biographical details for publication. 

## Table Mountain Report

Dr. E. J. Moll's erudite report on the ecological status of Table Mountain will be published shortly. The report, which was requested by the C.S.I.R. following the Mountain Club's report of 1974, which focused attention on the deterioration of the mountain, has received financial support from the Society's Flora Conservation Committee.

As the first major report since 1927 it has much to cover; it is hoped that note will be taken of the current state and recommendations for the future management of one of the best loved and most massive of our National Monuments.

Dr. Moll considers the ecological status of the mountain as 'generally fairly poor' with not only alien species but also indigenous species of flora which never occurred on the mountain. However, all is not yet lost and if something is done the state of the natural vegetation could still be restored to what it was when van Riebeeck arrived.

This report is commended to the present incumbent of van Riebeeck's chair. Please Mr. Tyers take a lead in ensuring that we hand on both a *Disa* and a butterfly which rejoice in the name 'Pride of Table Mountain' and please no more *Disa* Park type 'pepper pots'!