

## PROFESSOR OLIVE MARY HILLIARD BURTT (1925–2022)

Nobody who worked at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) in the 1980s and '90s is likely to have forgotten the figures of 'Bill' Burtt and Olive Hilliard, in their respective brown tweed and snow-white cotton lab coat, on their morning walk through the Garden from their Goldenacre flat, examining plants of seasonal interest (including their own introductions from the Drakensburg mountains, such as *Rhodohypoxis* and *Diascia*), to the herbarium to which they contributed so many specimens (their joint collecting numbers reached 19,248). Bill died in 2008, and Olive, after a long decline, on 30 November 2022. Having found it impossible to revisit the Garden following his death, she was fated to outlive him for 14 years.

Olive Mary Hillary (Figure 1) was born in Durban on 4 July 1925. Her mother was English and had emigrated to Natal following the death of her first husband, who was fatally gassed in the trenches in 1917; her paternal grandfather had emigrated to Natal in 1858 with three brothers, each of whom had a fruit farm that was eventually overcome by Durban sprawl. Olive attended the Durban Convent of the Holy Family, where she was school dux and won a scholarship to the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg. Although her initial inclination was towards geology (following in the footsteps of Dudley Stamp, a relation of her mother), the dean of the science faculty considered geology unsuitable for a girl and persuaded her towards botany. She graduated with a B.Sc. in 1946, followed by an M.Sc., with a dissertation on the ecology of the sand dunes at Tongaat Beach. Her inspirational professor, Adolf Bayer, then sent Olive to undertake postgraduate work with Dr R. Allen Dyer at the Botanical Research Institute, Pretoria, which included a three-week field trip to the mamba-ridden bushveld of Botswana (then the Bechuanaland Protectorate). In October 1948 she married Jack Hilliard (1921–2004), an electrical engineer, and moved back to Durban, which put a stop to her botanical work: government regulations forbade the employment of married women.

The Hilliards built a house on a three-acre site at 2000 feet on the edge of a forested gorge of the Molweni river ten miles northwest of Durban. The creation of the garden gave her enormous pleasure, but it was full of snakes (night adders and the occasional puff adder), which Olive learned to shoot and take to the university for identification. A medical school for students categorised under apartheid as 'non-white' had been opened by the university at Salisbury Island in Durban Bay in 1947, but politics soon intervened. The botanist Hans Meidner (later of Stirling University) was imprisoned for his political beliefs, and Olive was employed in his place to teach first-year science to first-year students, all

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A photograph of *Agalmyla paucipilosa* Hilliard & B.L.Burtt has been chosen for the front cover of volume 80. This species was published in *Edinburgh Journal of Botany* 59(1): 80 (<https://journals.rbge.org.uk/ejb/article/view/1069>).



Figure 1. Olive Mary Hilliard, photographed by Bernard Mills, Durban, c.1950.

of whom were black, Asian or of mixed ethnicity. Some of her closest friends were active members of the Black Sash; she was under government surveillance, her telephone tapped both at work and at home. Olive hated the Afrikaans government, which could not tolerate dual nationality and forced her to surrender her South African passport. It also wanted to prevent the university from taking black students, at which point the teachers donned their gowns and marched in protest to the Town Hall, where they were addressed by Alan Paton and Edgar Brookes.

In 1963, Olive returned to Pietermaritzburg to run the herbarium there for Professor Bayer, first as a research fellow and then as curator. The work included identification of plants submitted by the public, such as ones killing farmers' cattle; pot plants ingested by children; a poisonous plant given by Zulu mothers supposedly to strengthen their children. But she also embarked on her own taxonomic research, especially on legumes and composites, and on the genus *Streptocarpus*. Much of this work was unpublished, left as notes in the herbarium. For her taxonomic revision of *Streptocarpus* she received a Ph.D. in 1965. She was made Associate Research Professor (with no teaching responsibilities) in 1981. By far

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the most substantial publication of this period was her 650-page volume on the large and extremely difficult daisy family: *Compositae in Natal* (1977).

Regular journeys to Europe, initially holidays, became research trips to visit herbaria and attend conferences. Of these, the most significant was with her husband in 1964. She had been invited to Edinburgh by Bill Burt to discuss *Streptocarpus*, over which they had already started a correspondence. The timing was auspicious: it coincided with the International Botanical Congress and the opening by Queen Elizabeth II of a revolutionary new herbarium designed largely by Bill. Shortly after this, Olive met him again at Kew and dropped what proved to be a bombshell to one who, at this point, knew the plants only from herbarium specimens:

O.M.H.: "Streps hybridise."

B.L.B.: "Are you sure?"

O.M.H.: "Yes, quite sure. There are occasional colonies of similar flowers; others are thinly spread with clearly visible crosses, some are all crossed – hybrid swarms – some are such that they record only the markings of another species."

By that same Christmas Bill was in South Africa, where he met up with Olive at Paulpietersburg for a three-week field trip to the Transvaal Drakensburg to look at *Streptocarpus* in the wild – the first of a series of expeditions during which around 13,640 herbarium collections were made. In total there were to be 19 such trips (including two to Malawi), which became more frequent following Bill's official 'retirement' from RBGE in 1975; these were undertaken mainly between December and March, to coincide with the best flowering time. The southern Drakensberg was then virtually unknown botanically, but its flora proved exceptionally rich. The expeditions were intrepid and often involved sleeping in caves and rock overhangs. Bill was fearless, but Olive admitted to often being scared: thick mists would descend; rivers rise after downpours, making it hard to cross in vehicles or by horse. There were dangerous animals: while looking for *Streptocarpus cooperi* they were pelted with stones by baboons; on an ill-advised leap from a car for a clump of *Cyrtanthus galpinii* they disturbed a black rhino, which proceeded to run, at considerable speed, beside the escaping vehicle. Each expedition was of about six days, by which time the plant presses were full, the food (blocks of frozen rice and stew, kept in polystyrene boxes in caves or streams) exhausted. It was only with the help of forest guards, who took equipment up to the caves on Basuto ponies, and from Forest Officer Bill Small and F. B. 'Bob' Wright, who worked for the Parks Board on a reserve for breeding dogs for hunting jackals, that such expeditions were possible.

The result, from 1970 onwards, was a stream of joint publications, including 15 papers in the series 'Notes on some plants of Southern Africa, chiefly from Natal', published in the *Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh*. These covered families such as Compositae and Umbelliferae, the genus *Geranium*, and groups of horticultural interest including *Galtonia* (now

*Ornithogalum*, Hyacinthaceae) and *Diascia* (Scrophulariaceae). By far the most handsome was the folio monograph *Dierama: The Hairbells of Africa* (1991), illustrated by Olive's friend Auriol Batten, who had trained as an artist and also had a degree in botany. The illustrations show the plants in watercolour against pencil habitat backgrounds, and there are also pencil endpieces. Auriol had the same concern for detail as Olive, and for *Dierama jucundum* drove hundreds of miles from her home in East London to draw the cliff for its background.

The work on the montane flora culminated in *The Botany of the Southern Natal Drakensberg* (1987) jointly authored with Bill, but Olive also wrote three slim popular field guides to the plants of the Drakensberg. She inspired and assisted younger botanists, most notably Elsa Pooley, who built on Olive's work with a series of much more substantial field guides to the plants and trees of Natal and the Drakensburg.

Olive retired from her personal chair in 1985, and although invited to stay on at the herbarium for a further five years, made the difficult decision to leave her elderly mother, sister and niece (her marriage had long since broken down) to live in Edinburgh to continue her taxonomic collaboration with Bill. She arrived in April 1986 and was made an Honorary Research Associate of RBGE in December of the following year (Figure 2). She would return



Figure 2. Olive Mary Hilliard, photographed by Professor Loutfy Boulos, Kew, c.1990.

to South Africa only twice – in 1987 for the birthday of her mother, who died later the same year, and in 1991 to receive a D.Sc. (*honoris causa*) from the University of Natal.

In Edinburgh, Olive's work was initially devoted largely to the family Scrophulariaceae, to two of its particularly large and intractable Tribes, which resulted in major monographs on Manuleae (1995) (Figure 3), with illustrations by her botanical-artist friend and RBGE colleague Mary Mendum, and on Selagineae (1999). From the late 1990s, as his health declined, she again collaborated with Bill over his prolific and long-running contribution to the study of Southeast Asian Gesneriaceae. A series of 12 papers under the title 'Old World Gesneriaceae' published in the *Edinburgh Journal of Botany* encompassed the tricky genera of *Epithema*, *Agalymla* and *Cyrtandra*. Olive also wrote the account of the family for the *Flora of Bhutan*.



**Figure 3.** *Zaluzianskya maritima* (L.f.) Walp., a species in one of Olive's favourite genera and treated in her monograph of Manuleae. Watercolor by Auriol Batten, painted between Kidd's Beach and Palm Springs in the Eastern Cape, 16 February 1986. This was made for Olive's retirement – her footsteps can be seen in the sand, upper left.

Olive's work was undertaken almost entirely in 'pre-molecular' days, based on close observation assisted by meticulous recording of data and associated drawings, which allowed her to discover many new and useful distinguishing morphological characters. Her love of fieldwork and of living plants, and her interest in plant geography, made her aware of the importance of processes such as hybridisation so that her work was informed by characters beyond those provided by desiccated specimens. She and Bill collaborated with numerous fellow scientists, notably at Edinburgh with Kwiton Jong and Michael Moeller for their cytological expertise, and Frieda Christie for her skills in electron microscopy.

The couple also had a network of international contacts and would visit Continental herbaria including Copenhagen, Paris, and especially Vienna, where Bill worked closely with Anton 'Tony' Weber. These travels enabled them to pursue their cultural interests, especially music (the classical canon, excepting the human voice), and in the 1990s they made a series of holidays, carefully researched beforehand, and afterwards written up by Olive in illustrated, handwritten journals. One was to Orkney and five to Turkey, places with rich combinations of botany and archaeology.

Following the death of Bill's wife Joyce, after a lengthy but amicable estrangement, the couple were eventually able to marry on 30 March 2004: Olive was 78, Bill 90. By this time Bill's ambition to work until he was 95 had been foiled: they gave up work soon afterwards and moved to the former mining village Bonnyrigg, where a garden made for her by RBGE colleagues Martin and Sabina Gardner gave her great pleasure. Bill died in 2008, but with the help of devoted neighbours George and Ann Mackrell, Olive was able to stay at home until a month before the end. She never came round to the idea of e-mail, the Internet, or television, but maintained a correspondence (written and telephonic) with friends in South Africa and occupied her time in reading (Aurel Stein was a favourite) and in the writing of voluminous memoirs of Bill's life and their travels in her elegant, microscopic hand – some of which might, it is hoped, one day see the light of day.

Although Olive would have been furious that there could exist a Wikipedia article about her, it is, by way of conclusion, perhaps worth quoting one of its statistics. 'Hilliard authored 372 land plant species names, the fifth-highest number of such names authored by any female scientist'. The recording of such information she would have reckoned pointless and vainglorious; but, setting to one side the inelegance of its wording, and just perhaps after so long and distinguished a career, she might have allowed herself a wry, if posthumous, smile at such vanities.

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### *Solo papers (including Flora accounts)*

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Botanic Garden, vol. 15). Cape Town: Kirstenbosch National Botanic Gardens; 253 pp., 38 plates, 6 maps.

Hilliard OM, Burt BL. 1991. Dierama: The Hairbells of Africa. Randburg: Acorn Books; 152 pp., 46 colour plates (by Auriol Batten).

## Eponymy

### Genera

*Hilliardia* B.Nordenstam, Opera Botanica 92:147 (1987). (COMPOSITAE)

*H. zuurburgensis* (Oliver) B.Nordenstam, Opera Botanica 92:147 (1987).

*Matricaria zuurburgensis* Oliv., Hooker's Icones Plantarum 23:t. 2230 (1892).

*Vernonia* [subg. *Orbivestus* S.B.Jones sect. *Orbivestus*] subsect. *Hilliardianae* S.B.Jones, Rhodora 83:66 (1981). (COMPOSITAE)

*Hilliardiella* H.Rob., Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington 112:229 (1979). (COMPOSITAE) (based on *Vernonia* ... subsect. *Hilliardianae* S.B.Jones).

### Species

*Plectranthus hilliardiae* Codd, Bothalia 11:282 (1974). (LABIATAE)

*Cymbopappus hilliardiae* B.Nordenstam, Botanika Notiser 129:153 (1976). (COMPOSITAE)

*Helichrysum hilliardiae* Wild, Kirkia 12:192 (1983). (COMPOSITAE)

*Schizoglossum hilliardiae* Kupicha, Kew Bulletin 38:620 (1984). (APOCYNACEAE)

*Ericinella hillburtii* E.G.H.Oliver, Bothalia 16:46 (1986). (ERICACEAE)

*Streptocarpus hillburtianus* T.Edwards, Novon 13:186 (2003). (GESNERIACEAE)

*Agalmyla hilliardiae* D.J.Middleton & S.M.Scott, Edinburgh Journal of Botany 65:49 (2008). (GESNERIACEAE)

*Pseudoselago hilliardiae* J.C.Manning & Goldblatt, Strelitzia 29:818 (2012). (SCROPHULARIACEAE)

### Honours

Kirstenbosch Jubilee Prize (1983)

Gold Medal of the South African Association of Botanists (1984)

D.Sc. (*honoris causa*), University of Natal (1991)

Veitch Memorial Gold Medal, Royal Horticultural Society (1992)