

Aspects of Tasmanian Botany — a tribute to Winifred Curtis

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This publication by the Royal Society of Tasmania is very timely since Winifred Curtis has just finished one of her major projects. This is the *Student's Flora of Tasmania*. The final volume, Part 4B has been sent to the printers, although we will have to wait until next year before we can purchase a copy.

The *Student's Flora* is not the only major Tasmanian botanical work completed during Winifred's distinguished career. Her biographer in this volume, Gintaras Kantvilas, indicates that the *Endemic Flora of Tasmania* in six volumes interrupted the work on the *Student's Flora* between 1967 and 1978. In many ways the *Endemic Flora* may be seen as at least an equal achievement. It contains beautiful illustrations by Margaret Stones, and some delightful personal descriptions of the illustrated plants by Winifred. These descriptions pay appropriate attention to precision characterised by the work on the Flora, but also illustrate the warm and helpful personality behind the technical work.

Many members of the botanical community will have fond memories of field outings and personal contact with Winifred. My favourite memory is one day at Mount Field National Park, when someone pointed to a low-growing shrub. Winifred said words to the effect: "I remember naming that plant, but I can't think of the name for a moment". To me this comment epitomises the greatness of the lady we hold in fond regard as so few are entitled to make such a statement. The shrub was *Helichrysum backhousii* var. *backhousii*; Winifred was responsible for the three varieties of this species.

This special volume published by the Royal Society is a compendium of 28 papers by authors from Tasmania, the Australian mainland and overseas. A great variety of topics are addressed. A few papers mention non-vascular plants, one of which is a checklist of the mosses which are known to occur in the State. About half of the papers are mainly concerned with taxonomy of Tasmania's higher plants. Other papers are concerned with plant distributions and conservation. A few provide in-depth analysis and discussion of one or more native plant species. Towards the end are two papers with historical interest, one concerning Gunn's visit to Port Phillip in 1836 and another concerned with fossil evidence of plants from the super-continent Gondwanaland.

The taxonomy papers in this volume range from technical renaming of species to those which describe plants which have only been discovered or noticed recently. Amongst the papers of a technical (and somewhat annoying) nature is one by Dennis Morris. For a few species this paper reinstates old names

which have been overlooked and out of use for many years. We find that *Gahnia graminifolia* (the grass-leaved gahnia – a very descriptive name) should be called *Gahnia rodwayii*, despite the fact Rodway said “for various reasons I have preferred to change its name”. Apparently such behaviour is out. Even more confusing is that *Restio monocephalus* (single-headed cord rush) has been used for the wrong species for many years. (The situation here has been uncomfortable for many years, since plants we had been calling by this name have several heads.) Now *Restio monocephalus* is the name we should use for erstwhile *Restio glaber*, which does have a single head, while erstwhile *Restio monocephalus* (the one with many heads) should be called *Restio hookeri*!

Several of the papers which deal with newly described taxa are very welcome to me since they clarify problems which have been apparent for many years. When visiting the western mountains, particularly on poor soils derived from quartzite, a form of *Cyathodes petiolaris* has looked quite different from that typical on dolerite mountains elsewhere. The leaves have a very plain white midrib. This plant is now described by S. J. Jarman and C. M. Mihaich as *Cyathodes sulcata*. Also in the mountains there is a treatment of the “prostrate form” of *Leucopogon collinus*. I was surprised to find that two new taxa have been described to deal with these populations. In a different habitat at the coast a very large buzzy (or biddy-widdy) may be seen binding the sand-dunes. We now learn that this should be called *Acaena pallida*, which was formerly thought to be restricted to New Zealand.

A volume of this sort would not be complete without a new species being named after Winifred Curtis. J. G. West has named a plant discovered in recent years in the midlands as *Colobanthus curtisiae*. This plant is rare and endangered, according to the paper only two plants are known from any conservation area, and very few localities are known in total.

Amongst the non-taxonomy papers is a detailed study of the flora of the Cradle Mountain–Pencil Pine area. This includes vegetation maps and a plant census for the area. Another paper which may be of interest to amateurs discusses four of Tasmania’s cushion plants. Any thoughts that this paper may offer the magic recipe for identifying these species when not in flower is dispelled since much of the discussion focuses on microscopic features.

Papers relevant to Tasmania similar to those in this book are published regularly in a range of scientific journals. This book provides an opportunity to capture a good cross section of these papers in one volume. There are many interesting topics covered in this book which I have not mentioned. Much of it is accessible to the amateur and with the addition of the biography of Winifred Curtis I can recommend it as an interesting and significant work in the history of botany in Tasmania.