



# Sophie Ducker

## DISTINGUISHED BOTANIST AND LIBRARY BENEFACTOR

by Dorothea Rowse

**I**n June 2004 Dr Sophie Ducker AM BSc MSc DSc LLB (Hons) of the University of Melbourne died at the great age of 95. She was a distinguished member of the Botany School for 50 years and a wonderful benefactor to the University Library. Sophie was a woman who possessed great breadth of knowledge and wide-ranging interests, amongst which was a passion for beautiful books.

Sophie was born in Germany, schooled in Dresden and England, and commenced botanical studies at Geneva and Stuttgart Universities. She married in the early 1930s, and the outbreak of war in 1938 forced the family to flee from Germany ending up in the exotic location of Persia. During this period Sophie also spent a year as a governess on a farm in Rhodesia, in which country her parents were living at the time. The family

**Above:** This bookplate appears in all the books that Dr Ducker donated to the Library.

made their way to Australia before Japan entered World War 2 and spent some time in a detention centre at Tatura in country Victoria.

After a period of settling down in Melbourne, Sophie's career at the University of Melbourne commenced, initially as a research assistant to Dr Ethel McLennan, working on soil micro-organisms. A Bachelor of Science followed and she was appointed in 1953 to the position of Senior Demonstrator. By the end of her career she had become Reader in Botany. She retired officially in 1974.

Sophie's research interests were focussed on algae. Her master's thesis was devoted to the topic and her research continued for many years thereafter, concentrating in particular on the benthic algae of Port Philip Bay.<sup>1</sup> At a later date she became interested in marine flowering plants, fascinated in particular by how they flowered under water. She was also

## From the Ducker Collection:



**Above:** Illustration of *Fucus banksii*, in Dawson Turner, *Fuci, sive, Plantarum fucorum generi a botanicis ascriptarum icones descriptiones et historia*, vol. 1, (Fuci, or, Colored figures and descriptions of the plants referred by botanists to the genus fucus.) (London, J. and A. Arch, 1808–1819.)



**Above:** Plate 16, in John Ellis, *Versuch einer Naturgeschichte der Corall-Arten ... (Essay towards a natural history of corallines and other marine productions of the like kind.)* (Nürnberg, Gabriel Nikolaus Raspe, 1767.)



**Above:** Plate 3, in James Edward Smith, *A Grammar of Botany, illustrative of artificial as well as natural classification, with an explanation of Jussieu's system.* (London, Longman and Co., 1821.)

**Right:** Plate 23, in Mrs Alfred Gatty, *British Sea-weeds: drawn from Professor Harvey's "Phycologia britannica", with descriptions, an amateur's synopsis, rules for laying out sea-weeds, an order for arranging them in the herbarium and an appendix of new species*, vol. 1. (London, Bell and Daldy, 1872.)







Title page and frontispiece, John Ellis, *Versuch einer Natur-Geschichte der Corall-Arten ... (Essay towards a natural history of corallines and other marine productions of the like kind.)* (Nürnberg, Gabriel Nikolaus Raspe, 1767.)

extremely interested in the history of botany and early botanists, especially those who had described Australian flora. Her book on William Henry Harvey, an Irish botanist of the mid-19th century specialising in seaweeds, who visited Australia, was published under the title of *The Contented Botanist* in 1988. She was also interested in the history of gardens, especially botanic gardens, and collected carved turtles and tortoises. She was awarded the Mueller medal in 1996 for her contribution to marine botany and her research into Australian botanical history, and the AM (Member of the Order of Australia) in 1997 for her contribution to the history of botany and her contribution to education and science.

Sophie was also a passionate bibliophile and the University of Melbourne Library benefitted magnificently from her largesse. She was an enthusiastic member of the committee of the Friends of the Baillieu Library for many years and played an important role in the selection of books that the Friends donated to the Library.

The Ducker collection, which is a part of the Special Collections in the University Library, contains approximately 1200 volumes of largely modern books. The collection provides an interesting insight into Sophie's wide-ranging interests. Botany features highly and there are numbers of books on marine plants, corals and a wide array of books on algae. General books on science also feature and her interest in the history and biographies of scientists shows clearly in the collection of works in this area. Of interest is an early 19th

century edition of Cook's voyages, in three volumes, in a German translation.

The collection of books Sophie donated to the Library contains mainly modern works in a myriad of subject areas, for example, a good collection of early Baedekers, books on travel to areas that must have attracted her, and some literature, etc. There are also some very interesting earlier publications.

The marine biology area includes books on seaweeds. *British Sea-weeds* by Mrs Alfred Gatty (1872 in two volumes) was aimed at the amateur collector of seaweeds, with a strong emphasis on female collectors. The introduction provides an elaborate justification for the hobby and follows this up with notes on how to dry and preserve seaweeds. The body of the book includes a wealth of exquisite coloured drawings of seaweeds. Mrs Gatty was mainly a children's writer and many of her works are to be found in the Library's Morgan Collection of children's books. At least one of her books was illustrated by Phiz, one of the main contemporary illustrators of books by Charles Dickens.

*Fuci, sive, Plantarum fucorum generi a botanicis ascriptarum icones descriptiones et historia (Fuci, or, Colored figures and descriptions of the plants referred by botanists to the genus fucus)* by Dawson Turner (1808–1819 in four volumes) is another source of some finely drawn and beautifully hand-coloured illustrations of seaweeds, in this case the genus *Fucus*. The work was dedicated to Sir Joseph Banks and the first illustration is of *Fucus Banksii*, a seaweed supplied to the author



Dr Ducker at the crease. The University of Melbourne System Garden tower can be seen in the background. (Hand drawn card, 1984, Ducker Collection)

by Banks and named in consideration of the kindness Banks had shown to the author. The genus was found on the shores of New Holland<sup>2</sup> and was described by the author as 'a plant sui generis and differs from every other species yet known'. It was also said to be 'extraordinarily tough'! Dawson Turner was a banker, botanist, antiquary, art collector and the father of Elizabeth, wife of Sir Francis Palgrave. He published a number of works on the Fuci, mainly those of the British Isles.

Books on corals also attracted Sophie's attention and there is a mid-18th century German edition of the book by John Ellis, *An Essay Towards a Natural History of the Corallines, and Other Marine Productions of the Like Kind, Commonly Found on the Coasts of Great Britain and Ireland: to which is added the description of a large marine polype taken near the North Pole by the whale-fishers, in the summer 1753*.<sup>3</sup> This covers corals found along the coasts of the British Isles and the book includes finely engraved black and white illustrations. The frontispiece is an artistic underwater seascape of corals of many forms, with a couple of sailing ships in the distance.

One of the books in the collection is an early study on worms, *Von Wurmen des Süßsen und Salzigen Wasser: mit Rupfern*, by Otto Fridrick Müller (1771). The study is illustrated with some scientific engravings of worms, and also has a delightful engraved frontispiece of rather anxious mermaids, one of whom is riding a sea monster.

There are also some early works on botany in general. An example of this is *A Grammar of Botany Illustrative of Artificial as well as Natural Classification, with an Explanation of Jussieu's System*, by Sir James Edward Smith (1821). The book describes the various orders in Jussieu's classification, making copious references to plants from Australia, described by the botanist Robert Brown in his publication *Prodromus Floræ Novæ Hollandiæ et Insulæ Van-Diemen: exhibens Characteres Plantarum quas annis 1802–1805*. James Smith (1759–1828)

was a British botanist who studied medicine in Edinburgh and Leiden. He purchased the Linnaean herbarium in 1784 which he moved to Norwich. He studied the material, some of which he rearranged and relabelled, and used the collection as the basis for many publications. Possibly the most important effect of the purchase was the founding in 1788 of the Linnean Society.

In addition to her own collection of books, Sophie donated a very early printed book which had belonged to her father, Viktor von Klemperer; *St Augustine's De Arte Praedicandi* was printed in Strasbourg by Johannes Mentelin in 1466. The book has a fine typeface with the capital letters highlighted in red. It is a working copy for scholars and has some faint notes in red on a couple of the margins. It exemplifies the way in which the early printers were able to make formerly expensive texts available at a reasonable cost to scholars. Viktor von Klemperer's collection of incunabula was adjudged to be one of the best ever assembled. This item was no. 384 in his collection.

Sophie continued to take a very active interest in the University Library until her death and was sometimes feared, but always revered by all the Library staff who worked with her. Her generous donation of scientific publications will ensure that the University Library will continue to remember her and its researchers will benefit from her scholarship.

Dorothea Rowse was the Sciences Librarian and is currently the Manager of Information Access at the University of Melbourne Library.

## NOTES

- 1 Dr Ducker's DSc thesis, *Studies in Marine Botany*, 1978, is held in the University Library.
- 2 That is, New South Wales.
- 3 *Versuch einer Natur-Geschichte der Corall-arten und anderer dergleichen Mer-Cörper welche gemeinlich an der küsten von Gross-Britannien und Irrland gefunden werden...*