

OBITUARY

JAN ERENS (1911–1982)

Born in Groningen, Holland, on 5 August 1911, Jan Erens came to South Africa with his family in July 1914, and shortly afterwards his father, who was a trained horticulturalist, acquired a property along the northern foothills of the Magaliesberg between Pretoria and Brits. Growing up in a country environment where he was used to hard work, Jan developed a deep love of the land and nature, and at the age of 15 he left school to help with his father's cut-flower and fruit-growing business. After a further period of training in a commercial nursery, he joined the Pretoria Parks Department on 6 February 1930 and was soon put in charge of the Department's nursery in the Fountains Valley.

On 1 July 1935 he was appointed to the then Division of Plant Industry under Dr I. B. Pole Evans and was responsible for the garden around the Division's headquarters at 590 Vermeulen Street, Pretoria. Here his interest in indigenous plants was stimulated by contact with Dr E. P. Phillips, Dr R. A. Dyer and Dr Inez Verdoorn. It was a period when the public were becoming increasingly conscious of the rich South African flora and Jan showed that he was quick and eager to absorb knowledge in this new field. At that time the Department of Agriculture's horticultural section was also part of the Division of Plant Industry, so he had the opportunity of gaining first-hand information on fruit and flower growing from leading authorities such as H. B. Terry, Dr Vincent Reynecke and Dr C. J. Strydom, which stood him in good stead in later years.

In 1937 and 1938 Dr Pole Evans undertook two major expeditions: in 1937 to Ngamiland and in 1938 (the year before his retirement) through east tropical Africa to Kenya and Uganda, reaching as far north as Lake Rudolph on the border of Ethiopia. On both expeditions he took C. J. J. van Rensburg to gather living material of promising grazing grasses and Jan Erens to make a general herbarium collection and to collect plants and seeds for garden purposes.

These expeditions resulted in the addition of about 2 000 herbarium specimens and over 500 collections for the garden. Many of the latter flowered in subsequent years and were figured in *Flowering plants of South Africa* from 1940 onwards. Of the 40 plates in Volume 20 (1940), 12 were from the East African expedition, and it was probably this influx of material from the north that prompted the change in the title of the journal to *Flowering plants of Africa* from Volume 25 (1945). A number of the plants were described as new, including two which commemorated the collectors: *Aloe pole-evansii* Christian and *A. erensii* Christian.

The great variety of indigenous plants being introduced into cultivation, often with widely different requirements, called for much experimentation and improvisation. It was the sort of challenge which Jan Erens (Fig. 1) enjoyed, and the large measure of success which he achieved is a reflection of his ability and dedication.



FIG. 1.—Jan Erens.

After a somewhat dormant period during the war years, botanical activity revived when Dr R. A. Dyer was appointed, in 1944, as Chief of what was then the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology, the old Division of Plant Industry having broken up into several constituent divisions on Pole Evans's retirement. The need for a botanic garden worthy of the Division had long been felt and, with the active support of Prof. Davel, Dean of the Agricultural Faculty of Pretoria University, a portion of the University Farm about 50 ha in extent was allocated for this purpose towards the end of 1945.

The initial laying out and development of the new garden were tackled with Jan Erens's usual enthusiasm and in 1947 he made the first plantings, which included the row of camelthorn trees between the present main building and the nursery, as well as the fine group of Acacias where the workshop is now situated. These stand as a monument to him which will last many years.

At the end of September 1949 he was appointed to the horticultural section of the Public Works Department, where he saw better opportunities for advancement. Starting as Head Gardener at the Union Buildings garden, he was soon placed in charge of the Pretoria region and, on 1 October 1967, he succeeded Mr Norman Mann as Control Superintendent, responsible for government gardens throughout South Africa. Through his personal example and leadership he did much to enhance the prestige of this section. In 1969 he represented his Department at the International Horticultural Congress held in Switzerland. He also acted in an advisory capacity to the Voortrekker Monument

Committee and to the South African War Graves Commission.

He was a foundation member of the Institute of Parks Administration and was President during the meeting of the Institute in Pretoria in 1971. As a committee member for twelve years and as a member of the Technical Training Subcommittee, he played an active part in furthering the Institute's objectives and, in particular, in improving the conditions of the learner horticulturalists.

In 1942 Dr Dyer persuaded him to become Honorary Secretary of the Pretoria Horticultural Society 'as a temporary measure,' a task which he undertook with distinction for the next 25 years, ending as President of the Society from 1967 to 1977. During this period he was the mainspring of the Society, tireless when it came to organizing their shows, and contributing regular articles to the Society's magazine which reflected his wide experience and extensive knowledge of horticulture. In these activities he was greatly helped by his wife Iris, who, in the early 1950's, was one of the pioneers in what was then a new trend in flower arranging. Together they wrote a book entitled 'Flowers for the Home and Garden' in which many of her artistic floral compositions are illustrated.

At the end of September 1974 he took his pension from the Public Works Department and rejoined the staff of the Botanical Research Institute, where he was helpful in many ways, but mainly in the nursery, propagating material for mass displays in the garden. He regularly supplied ornamental plants and flowers for the main building and one of his last contributions was the provision of pot-plants and flowers for the AETFAT meeting in the CSIR Conference Centre in January 1982. He died suddenly in the nursery on 5 February 1982 during a particularly trying spell of summer weather.

Throughout my long association with him as a colleague and fellow committee member, I have found him to be a staunch and generous friend who was prepared to work himself to a standstill in a good cause. He was sincere, upright and unselfish to a degree, often at the cost of personal sacrifice, but could not tolerate injustices, especially to those less privileged than himself. He will be remembered for his boundless energy and enthusiasm, his ready smile and his willingness to lend a helping hand wherever he could.

L. E. CODD