

ANN BIRNIE: IN MEMORIAM

9 July 1938–8 November 2020



Ann Birnie, who died aged 82 on 8th November 2020 in the Aga Khan University Hospital, Nairobi, was a talented educationalist, botanist, artist and author dedicated to the conservation of nature and to spreading knowledge of the plants of eastern Africa. She was born on 9th July 1938 in Coventry in the UK and graduated in botany from Kings College (University of London). She then trained as a teacher, specifically for education in tropical areas. She started her career in 1961, travelling to Mwanza, Tanzania (then still Tanganyika) to teach at Bwiru Girls School and later at Lake

Secondary School. Following her marriage to Jim in 1964 and the birth of their son in 1968 the family moved to Uganda in 1969.

Whilst in Tanzania she was active in the Science Teachers' Association, organising science field courses for regional schools and she received a Guinness Award for this work in 1966-67. She taught in various schools in Uganda and worked with Makerere University until 1977. Moving to Kenya with her family, she taught for a while in Nairobi and also started making small plant collections. She was contracted to illustrate *Common Useful Indigenous Trees and Shrubs of Kerio Valley, Elgeyo Marakwet* and this was the beginning of her career as a botanical artist and illustrator. She had a series of contracts from 1993 to 2004 with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA, RSCU), then RELMA as Botanical Consultant/Artist.

In Kenya Ann joined the East Africa Natural History Society (now Nature Kenya), the Kenya Museum Society and the Kenya Horticultural Society, and was a valued and active member of these organisations. With Fleur Ng'weno she began to prepare materials for the children's magazine *Rainbow* and made a nature trail for Wildlife Clubs of Kenya at their headquarters in Langata. In 1992 she provided information on the trees of the Nairobi National Park Orphanage for Kenya Wildlife Service, and lectured at the popular "Know Kenya" courses at the National Museums of Kenya, on the plant biodiversity of Kenya.

For five years from 1984 she collected specimens and worked on the illustrations for a book originally intended by Tim Noad for members about the trees of Karen Golf Club. This then became a book on trees of Nairobi, but eventually it became *Trees of Kenya*, which she co-authored with Tim. This highly successful book was published in 1989 and two editions and a fourth reprint were issued by 1994 and over 10,000 copies were sold. After a decade of the book being out of print, Ann began a revision and worked tirelessly on the changes and additions so that a 3rd completely revised and updated edition was published in 2011

under the title *Trees of Kenya. An Illustrated Field Guide* by Ann Birnie and Tim Noad. Sadly, Tim had passed away in 2010.

However, Ann then took up a campaign, with a dedicated group of likeminded individuals, for the revival of the Nairobi Arboretum, a once beautiful public green space near State House in Nairobi. She initiated Friends of Nairobi Arboretum (FONA) which was founded in 1993, under the umbrella of Nature Kenya (the East Africa Natural History Society). The Arboretum had declined during the 1970s and 80s due to neglect and lack of government funding. It was an insecure place to visit during those years. Ann, with Jim's staunch backing, ensured that FONA worked alongside Kenya Forest Service (formerly Forest Department) to maintain this green gem for recreation, education and scientific knowledge. FONA, among other actors, was also instrumental in preventing the Arboretum from becoming a landscape of high-rise buildings and it is now, hopefully, safe for the present and future generations to enjoy. Ann was Chairman of FONA from 1993 to 2007 when the Arboretum celebrated its centenary and she designed a set of postage stamps for Kenya to celebrate this anniversary. That year Ann also received an award from the East African Environmental Network, and another from Nature Kenya in 2009, in recognition of her contribution to conservation and education.

In between all these activities Ann carried out her assignments for SIDA and RELMA, co-authoring and/or illustrating a series of books on useful trees and shrubs of eastern African countries, namely Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zambia and Eritrea. By 2002 books on wild food plants of Uganda and Tanzania had also been produced. She found time in 1997 to produce a more popular book, *What tree is that? A beginner 's guide to 40 trees in Kenya*.

In addition to her botanical interests Ann was an accomplished musician, playing both the piano and violin, and regularly sang in concerts with the Kampala Singers and the Nairobi Music Society choir.

Ann also enjoyed playing golf and served as Lady Captain for a year at the Vet Lab Golf Club. Ann led many of her early tree walks on the various golf courses around Nairobi, most of which have a great variety of trees.

Ann and Jim relocated from Nairobi to Naro Moru in 2008. A quieter life enabled her to complete the third and revised edition of *Trees of Kenya*. In 2014 Ann was elected as a fellow of the Linnean Society of London, an honour which brought her much pleasure. Sadly, during the last few years of her life she suffered from dementia.

I first met Ann in 1961 when we were both starting our new lives in what was then Tanganyika when we met on the train from Dar es Salaam to Mwanza. Since then our lives have parted and met again, but I have always been in awe of her dedication to her art and her writing, and her determination to pass on her knowledge and enthusiasm to current and future generations. In her own words in the foreword to the last edition of *Trees of Kenya* “we rejoice that the role of trees in our environment worldwide has been better understood”—a fitting epitaph.

Ann Robertson, 2020

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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