The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE26050531

Ducker, Sophie Charlotte

(1909 - 2004)

Born	19090409, Berlin Germany
Died	20040520, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Botanist, University lecturer

Summary

Sophie Ducker was a renowned German-Australian botanist and botanical historian. Born in Berlin to a prominent family of Jewish ancestry, she fled a succession of war zones before arriving in Australia in 1941. She joined the University of Melbourne Botany Department in 1944 as a technical assistant. She was elevated to senior lecturer, then reader in Botany with a particular interest in mycology and phycology before her retirement in 1974, when she continued to research and publish works on the history of botany and botanists.

Details

Sophie Charlotte Ducker (née von Klemperer) was born on 9 April 1909 in Berlin, Germany, the daughter of Victor von Klemperer, a German banker of Jewish background, and his wife Sophie Reichenheim. She was raised and began her schooling in Dresden, later matriculating at Cheltenham Ladies College, England.

Sophie's interest in botany began at age six, while ill with scarlet fever, her grandmother taught her to preserve and press plants. She began her botanical studies with prominent freshwater phycologist R. H. Chodat (1865–1934) in Geneva and continued at the Universities of Geneva and Stuttgart. Her education was interrupted by her marriage to Dr Johan Friedrick Ducker in 1931. The couple's only surviving child, Klaus Heinrich Ducker, was born in 1933.

The emergence of the Nazi regime forced the family to flee Germany in 1938. They first settled in Tehran, Persia, now Iran, before Sophie travelled to visit her parents, who had fled to Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 trapped her in the country, where she remained for some time, finding employment as a governess on a remote farm. She booked passage on an Italian ship headed for Tehran in 1940, but the journey back to her husband and son was perilous, with Italy entering the war shortly after departure, the ship being pursued by a British warship before landing in remote southeastern Iran and obliging Sophie to make a risky journey overland, partly on camel, to reach her destination.

The Duckers sought refuge in Australia in 1941 and were detained at the Enemy Aliens Detention Centre at Tatura in Victoria, where conditions were difficult. In February 1944, Sophie gave birth to a stillborn daughter, Catherine Sophie Ducker, at Waranga Hospital in Goulburn, before returning to the internment camp. Circumstances at Tatura continued to deteriorate, and the family successfully petitioned for their release, settling in Melbourne.

Sophie returned to her botanical career in late 1944 when she was appointed technical assistant to Dr Ethel McLennan at the University of Melbourne's School of Botany, whose laboratory was establishing and maintaining cultures to study the antibiotic properties of fungi and soil microorganisms. She completed a Bachelor of Science and a master's degree during this time and became a Demonstrator in Botany in 1953. She was made Senior Lecturer in 1961 and was eventually appointed Reader in Botany in 1973 before stepping down in 1974, though she continued to conduct research, publish and lecture well into retirement. She was awarded a Doctor of Science (DSc) from the University of Melbourne in 1978.

Sophie believed her career had three distinct phases: the study of mycology, then phycology, beginning with the research of marine algae and expanding to include the study of marine flowering plants and seagrasses, followed by her late career interest in the history of botany and Australian gardens. She initiated the 1969 and 1973 studies of Port Philip Bay and, over the course of her career, supervised graduate students and maintained long collaborations with colleagues.

Sophie's fluency in several languages informed her historical research and her work in assessing the contributions of French, German and Austrian scientists to Australian botany and phycology. The work of Irish botanist William Henry Harvey (1811–1866) proved an enduring interest, and Sophie published six accounts of his life, the most notable being her book *The Contented Botanist*, issued in 1988. She also published on the work of figures such as William Dampier (1651–1715), Karl von Hügel (1794–1870) and Baron Ferdinand von Mueller (1825–1896), wrote on the history of the system garden at the University of Melbourne and contributed entries to the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Her interest in the history of women scientists may have been informed by the infamous 'glass ceiling' at the University of Melbourne, which saw many talented scientists, including Dr Ethel McLennon and Sophie herself, denied elevation to full professorship and only granted the rank of Reader in their final year before retirement.

Sophie was an avid reader and collector of books. As a member of the Committee of Friends of the Baillieu Library, she donated approximately 1200 volumes from her personal collection to the library's Special Collections. The Ducker Collection features many botanical publications with books on marine plants, corals and algae, as well as volumes reflecting her research into botanical illustration. Her archival papers can be found in the University of Melbourne Archives.

Sophie was awarded the Mueller Medal for her contribution to marine botany in 1996 and was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1997 for her research into the history of botany and her contribution to science and education. The University of Melbourne supports two scholarships in her name; the Sophie Ducker Postgraduate Scholarship for PhD students in the field of botany, while the Klemperer-Ducker Scholarship is open to honours and master's students studying native Australian flora.

Published resources

Interview
Getting to know them: Sophie Ducker, 2018,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/26780355

Article
Ducker, Sophie Charlotte (1909-2004), 1993,
https://www.eoas.info/biogs/P000374b.htm

Ducker, Sophie Charlotte (1909-2004), Maroske, Sarah, 2004,
https://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/ducker-sophie.html

A Tribute to Dr Sophie C Ducker, Rowan, KS, 1984

Sophie Ducker: Distinguished botanist and library benefactor, Rowse, D, 2004,
https://library.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1625603/rowse.pdf

Archival resources

University of Melbourne Archives
Papers of Sophie Charlotte Ducker

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