

OBITUARY

By Mary Bursey

Marjorie Eileen Doris Courtenay-Latimer was born in 1907. As a girl, she lived in various country towns in the Eastern Cape and Free State and, encouraged by her parents, she developed a deep love of and interest in nature. She was always on the lookout for interesting things and her curiosity and tenacity in pursuing questions until she had answers led her to make many important contributions to natural history. Most famous is her role in saving the first coelacanth known to western science, named *Latimeria chalumnae* after her as a tribute. This earned her admiration and respect from the scientific community the world over, and put East London and the East London Museum on the world map.

This enthusiastic young naturalist was appointed first curator of the newly established East London Museum in 1931. Collections were practically non-existent so she used the Latimer family collections of ethnographic material and natural history specimens (e.g. shells and birds' eggs) as the nucleus of her displays. The former is one of the finest collections of early cultural material of the Xhosa-speaking people and contains some very old pieces dating back to the second half of the 19th century. The collections built up by Marge with the help of friends and contacts form the backbone of the museum's present collections and displays. The shell collection is the third largest in the country and the birds' egg collection one of the most complete in the country. She enlisted the help of

commercial fishermen, thus obtaining many valuable marine specimens which she skinned and mounted herself. Marge pioneered the diorama concept in museums in South Africa by displaying specimens in as natural a setting as possible. Her bird and mammal displays have delighted thousands of visitors up to the present. She also had artistic talents and modelled the figures in the displays of Xhosa history. Marge was a Founder Member of the South African Museums' Association in 1936 and served on the SAMA council for 17 years. She received Honorary Life Membership in 1986. After 42 years of service Marge retired, spending 15 years at Tsitsikama before returning to East London. During this period she helped with the development of displays and collections at several museums in the Southern Cape.

In spite of its relatively small size, the East London Museum has a surprising number of specimens of international importance and Marge played a central role in their acquisition: the type specimen of the coelacanth, *Latimeria chalumnae*, possibly the world's only dodo egg, a skeleton of *Kannemeyeria simocephalus* - one of the most complete skeletons of a dicynodont yet recovered, and the oldest human fossil footprints in the world.

The dodo egg (which must still be verified by DNA analysis to be a dodo egg) was given to Marge by her great aunt, Lavinia Bean, shortly before she died in 1935. She had been given the egg by a friend of her father's on his return from Mauritius. Since Marge first drew the attention of the scientific community to the egg, there has been speculation as to its identity. Initially it was suggested that it was an abnormally small ostrich egg, but the pitting on the shell excluded that possibility. The

equally rounded ends suggested the pigeon family, which is the family to which the dodo belongs. This tied in with the story of the egg having come from Mauritius.

The skeleton of *Kannemeyeria simocephalus* is one of the most complete dicynodont skeletons in the world. Marge, assisted by Eric and Bess Wilson, dug for three days in the summer heat to excavate this large Karoo reptile on a farm near Tarkastad. It took Marge six months to clean and mount the skeleton, assisted by Eric's father. The specimen was initially thought to be a new species and named *Kannemeyeria wilsonii* by Dr Broom in 1937 after the Wilsons, who had done much for Marge and the museum. *Kannemeyeria* has revealed some secrets since it was first mounted and boxes of collected material from the site were opened recently for further research by scientists at the Bernard Price Institute for Palaeontology, University of the Witwatersrand.

Marge was a founder member of many societies promoting awareness and appreciation of our natural and cultural heritage, e.g. Border Shell Club, Border Branch of the Wild Life and Environment Society, Border Wild Flower Society, Border Historical Society. Marge was an active member of these societies until her passing.

Marge communicated her observations and research in regular newspaper columns, magazine articles and scientific journals. She collaborated extensively with local and foreign scientists working in a variety of disciplines. Through 42 papers, published mainly in *The Ostrich*, she has made an important contribution to ornithology. Marge had extensive collections of plants, together with detailed notes and she drew much of what

she collected. She assisted various prominent botanists such as Dr R.A. Dyer, Prof. Compton and Dr Codd with their work and accompanied them on collecting trips. Marge grew many of the plants she collected in the museum garden, which provided an additional educational opportunity, as did the flower table. Unfortunately, much of the garden has changed due to extensions to the museum buildings but still going strong are the poppies grown from seeds sent to her by soldiers from Tobruk and Delville Wood. One of Marge's many contributions to botany was the help she gave Auriol Batten and Hertha Hokelmann with the book, *Wild Flowers of the Eastern Cape Province*. Published in 1966 this remains a definitive work on the subject for much of the region. She took the authors to countless localities as she knew where many species grew from her own collections and she also had knowledge of traditional uses of plants. Finding a publisher proved somewhat difficult, but Marge was determined to get it published somehow. She negotiated with T.V. Bulpin to publish the book and it took three years to find the money. When it was finally published the authors dedicated it to her for all her assistance. She co-authored a book with G.G. Smith on the wild flowers of the Tsitsikama National Park, published in 1967.

The conservation of our natural and cultural heritage was always of vital concern to Marge. She realised the need to establish a reserve in the area near East London's West Bank to preserve the wealth of botanical diversity. Potters Pass Nature Reserve conserves a variety of habitats and has vast stands of *Dierama igneum* and *Watsonia pilansii*, no longer plentiful in coastal grasslands around East London. She was

also instrumental in founding the Gonubie Nature Reserve after nearly 25 years of struggling against pressing developments.

Marge was the recipient of numerous awards including Life Membership of the Royal Society of South Africa, Freedom of the City of East London and a medal from the South African Mint Company. In 1971 she received a Ph.D (*Honoris causa*) from Rhodes University for having built "a cultural institution of which East London, the Eastern Cape and South Africa can be proud and for her important contributions to South Africa's scientific and cultural life".

At 97 this sprightly lady had a vital interest in "her museum". Until very recently she attended most museum functions and was filmed regularly by overseas crews making documentaries on the coelacanth. She received scores of visitors, including internationally renowned scientists and was a great ambassador for East London.

Mary Bursey is a natural scientist with a M.Sc. in Zoology at the East London Museum, where she curates the mollusc collections. Her research project at the moment is terrestrial molluscs of the Eastern Cape. She has also worked on estuaries and rocky shores.



Bird Island, November and December, 1933. Photos: Courtenay-Latimer family.



Delegates at the South African Museums Association Annual Meeting, 19th-21st April, 1938 with Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer in the middle. Photo: Courtenay-Latimer family.



Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer with the coelacanth type specimen, *Latimeria chalumnae*, in 1939, as mounted by the East London taxidermist, Mr Center.
Photos: East London Museum.



Hendrik Goosen, Captain of the "Nerine",
1938.



Dr J. L. B. Smith, Professor of
Chemistry, Rhodes University, 1938