

## GERTRUD THEILER

11 September 1897 — 2 May 1986

The passing of Dr Gertrud Theiler on 2 May 1986 brought to an end an era in the history of both the Theiler family and scientific endeavour in South Africa, which spanned some 90 years. As is well known, it was her father, Sir Arnold Theiler, who founded and was the first Director of the Veterinary Research Institute, Onderstepoort. It was only after his death, though, that his younger daughter Gertrud joined the Institute's staff and brought further fame to it by her valuable studies on African ticks.

Gertrud Theiler was born on 11 September 1897 in Les Marais, Pretoria. After matriculating at Pretoria Girls' High School she studied at Rhodes University for a year, then went on to the South African College, Cape Town, where she obtained her B.Sc. in 1918. She followed this with several years of post-graduate study overseas on various aspects of helminthology, first with Professor Fuhrmann at the University of Neuchâtel, where she obtained her D.Sc. in 1922. Subsequently she studied with professor Warrington York at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and under Professor R.I. Leiper at the London School of Tropical Medicine. Her research during this period was documented in several scientific publications. Even today that on the strongylids and other nematode parasites of South African equines is regarded as one of the standard works on the subject.

Following her return to South Africa at the end of 1924 Dr Theiler spent 15 years teaching biology, initially at Jeppe High School for Girls, Johannesburg, where she stayed for 2 years. She left Jeppe to become Senior Lecturer in Zoology and Physiology at Huguenot University College, Wellington, and was promoted to the Professorship of the Department in 1935, a singular achievement, especially for a young woman at that time. She left Wellington after 3 years and, for a brief period only, lectured in Zoology at Rhodes University. In 1940 she was appointed in the Entomology Section at Onderstepoort and embarked on the full-time research career that was to occupy her for over 25 years and for which she became world renowned. Her detailed descriptions of numerous African tick species have in many cases still not been superceded. She also laid the foundations for our knowledge of the zoogeography of these parasites, especially those occurring in southern Africa. She always maintained close contact with other tick workers, not only in other African countries but all over the world. Over the years many of them visited her at Onderstepoort for training or discussions. She could always be relied on to provide help and advice, as well as to supply pertinent extracts from the literature, illustrations and reference specimens of ticks. These were a great boon, especially as relatively few people working in Africa at that time had access to such comprehensive library facilities as were available at Onderstepoort. She



officially retired in 1967, but returned to her original subject, helminthology, and remained at the laboratory as an honoured guest worker until 1983 — a most remarkable record of service. Throughout this period she was a member, sometimes in an honorary capacity, of a galaxy of scientific and cultural societies in South Africa as well as overseas. Her contributions to parasitology were recognized by the awards to her of the Senior Captain Scott Medal of the Biological Society in 1960 and the Elsdon Dew Medal of the Parasitological Society of Southern Africa in 1975.

But merely to list, however briefly, Gertrud Theiler's scientific achievements would be to lose sight of her as a person. She was, understandably, extremely proud of her family heritage. Essentially she herself was kindly and generous, with simple tastes as far as day-to-day living was concerned. The interests that occupied her leisure hours almost all involved some form of outdoor activity. At weekends, for example, she could often be found, dressed in an open-necked shirt and slacks, or khaki shorts in the summer, and usually bare-foot, up the kopje at the back of her house inspecting her treasured aloes or simply pottering in the garden with her dogs. For several years she was actively interested in dog training, and was an Executive Member of the Pretoria Dog School.

In her youth she was a keen sportswoman, and while at school played for the 1st teams in hockey, tennis and netball. From 1927 - 38 she played in, and coached,

the interprovincial hockey team for Huguenot (now Boland) and in 1939 represented Albany. When she settled in Pretoria again she coached the Odd Bods Women's Hockey Team for many years.

Gertrud Theiler was deeply involved with the conservation of all forms of nature and wild life and worked closely with the Wild Life Protection and Conservation Society of South Africa, serving on its council for 30 years. For many years she was also chairman of the editorial committee for the Society's magazine "African Wildlife", for which she obtained many interesting articles from all over Africa. She was a founder member of the Austin Roberts Bird Sanctuary in Pretoria and for a long time almost invariably spent her Sunday afternoons there, happily weeding and tidying up. Her holidays were usually spent touring, often in remote parts of this country or even further afield, with her close friend Andria van Gass, and sometimes also with some of her relations from Switzerland or friends from overseas. They travelled in leisurely fashion, stopping

where the fancy took them to cook their supper and then sleep under the stars. Even at home she normally slept out on the stoep, guarded by one or more of her much loved Dobermans — a habit that in later years, when she became very deaf, gave some of her friends anxious moments.

It was only her increasing deafness and failing sight that finally forced Gertrud Theiler to give up her scientific work. And, although towards the end of her life time must sometimes have hung heavily on her hands, she never complained. At the end of 1982 she moved to Stilbaai, in the western Cape, where she spent the last 3 ½ years of her life with Andria van Gass.

She is survived by her elder sister Margaret, who now lives with close friends in Pretoria. To Margaret, to members of the Theiler family overseas, and to Andria we offer our condolences.

JANE WALKER