

## 'The Father of Natal Botany'

JOHN MEDLEY WOOD

Born 150 years ago, settled in Durban 125 years ago.

*A biographical note on the accomplished botanist who administered the Durban Botanic Gardens for 31 years, 1882 to 1913. He made many botanical explorations throughout Natal, mainly by ox-waggon, when he was over eighty years of age. On his retirement at the age of eighty-six he continued with Herbarium work until his death. The author of this note is himself a professional botanist and former curator of the Natal Herbarium.*

I became interested in the origin and background of the three main curators of the Durban Botanic Gardens when I became curator of the Natal Herbarium in 1963. John Medley Wood was one of the most important but information about him was hard to get. Although he answered the questionnaire sent out by Christopher Bird to all the early settlers still living in 1896, his replies were most uninformative and little or nothing could be obtained about his youth and early life. He wrote:

In answer to your circular of 19th Nov. (1896) I have, I fear, but little to communicate that will be of public interest, but will answer your questions as briefly as possible.

Then followed brief statements that he was born in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, in 1827, that he arrived in May 1852 by the barque *Jane Morice*, that his family had preceded him in the Byrne settlers'hip *King William* in 1850, that his father J. Riddall Wood practised as a notary in Durban and was for a time deputy sheriff till his death in 1853, that he himself farmed near Verulam and at Inanda, that in 1882 he took charge of the Durban Botanic Gardens, that he had married in the Colony but had no family.

In a search for further information I obtained help from the obituaries in the Natal newspapers. Then I traced the grandniece of Medley Wood, Miss Phyllis Haygarth, who was of immense help as she possessed excerpts from the Wood family Bible. She also told me of letters given by the family to the Killie Campbell Africana Library. Dr. Killie Campbell who was then alive could not remember them but with her permission I searched through her immense card index and found them in a general file marked 'Reminiscences'.

As many people did a century ago to save paper and postage, the letters were partly written crosswise and made difficult reading. Miss McQueen, then assistant to Dr. Campbell, kindly undertook the task of deciphering them and making copies.

The letters are addressed to J. M. Wood, aboard the ship *Cornelia*, Liverpool. The first letter is written by his father James Riddall Wood from

Preston, England, on 3 August 1849, giving reasons why he had chosen Natal for emigration. The second letter, written by his brother James Weaver Wood, gives news of life and prospects in Natal. The third, written on 4th March 1851 at Durban by his father, gives an account of the happenings in the family and the outlook for the future. The fourth, of 20 October 1851, supplies general news of the Kaffir war, business, and the family.

Now for some background information about the Wood family. His parents, James Riddall Wood and Hannah Healey Weaver, were married in the Anglican parish church of St. Peter, Mansfield, in December 1826. Their first child John Medley was born on 1st December 1827 and baptized by his grandfather in his church. His grandfather was the Independent Rev. Robert Weaver whose congregation later joined the Unitarian Church. In this church a plaque honours the grandfather's 50 years of service from 1802 to 1852, the year when he died and John his grandson disembarked at Durban.

John's parents lived in Manchester where another four of their children were born. Then on the 25th December 1835, Christmas Day, the mother Hannah died when John Medley was only seven years old. It is believed that he afterwards lived with his grandparents or other Wood relations in Mansfield.

Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, is the chief town of the Sherwood Forest area and of ancient foundation. In the sandstone cliffs are dwellings excavated from the rock, some still in use as dwellings as late as the 1890s. Remains of Roman villas have been also found. In the centre of Mansfield a stone embedded in a wall marks the spot where once a tree stood which was reputed to be the centre of the famous Sherwood Forest of Robin Hood's time. To the north are the 'Dukeries' containing today the largest remnants of the old forest. To the south is Newstead Abbey, famous as the residence of the 'bad Lord Byron'. In 1227 King Henry III granted the town a market charter. The market is held to this day every week from Thursday to Saturday and is a colourful institution where general merchandise is sold to the people of the nearby coal mines. The most remarkable feature of the ancient town is the early railway viaduct towering over the old houses, its arches filled beneath with shops, storehouses, and even throughgoing streets, all still in use. In this environment John Medley lived his schooldays and early youth.

The year after his mother's death John's father re-married, his second wife being Mary Haygarth, a young woman only nine years older than John Medley. There were ten children of this marriage.

In 1844 John, aged 17, left school and began a seafaring career. He served on the ship *Cornelia*, which was owned by a Liverpool mercantile firm engaged in the East India trade. He must have shaped well in his profession for some years later when he left the ship he had reached the rank of 'acting' chief mate.

In 1849 his father, a lawyer, decided to emigrate to Natal with his wife and eleven children, and wrote to his son (as previously mentioned) acquainting him with his decision. In the next year letters sent from the family to John Medley must have convinced him of the advantages of emigrating to the new colony of Natal. Early in 1852 he made up his mind and on the 4th May 1852 he arrived at Port Natal in the barque *Jane Morice*.

For a while he assisted his father in his business as notary and deputy sheriff but within a year his father had died (6 April 1853) and John had to wind up his estate. Mary his step-mother gave birth posthumously to a daughter three months after her husband's death. When everything had been settled his step-mother went to Mount Moreland, the Byrne 'new town' near Verulam, where she set up a school.

John then entered the second phase of his life, trading and farming in the Verulam and Inanda areas for the next 30 years. During that time his love of nature had full outlet and he collected specimens of the indigenous flora as well as experimenting with plants like arrowroot, coffee, sugar-cane, etc., which were of great commercial importance to the pioneers.

During these years he built up his Natal reputation as a botanist but overseas people began to show interest in his work. In 1882 the committee of the Botanic Society, Durban, had no hesitation in appointing him the new curator. His work there placed him in the highest class of botanist and his publications increased his fame. In the year 1913 the University of Cape of Good Hope conferred on him an honorary doctorate of science. Various species of Natal plants also bear his name.

Professor J. Bews, the distinguished botanist, named John Medley Wood the 'Father of Natal Botany'.

Truly, an amazing career.

RUDOLF G. STREY