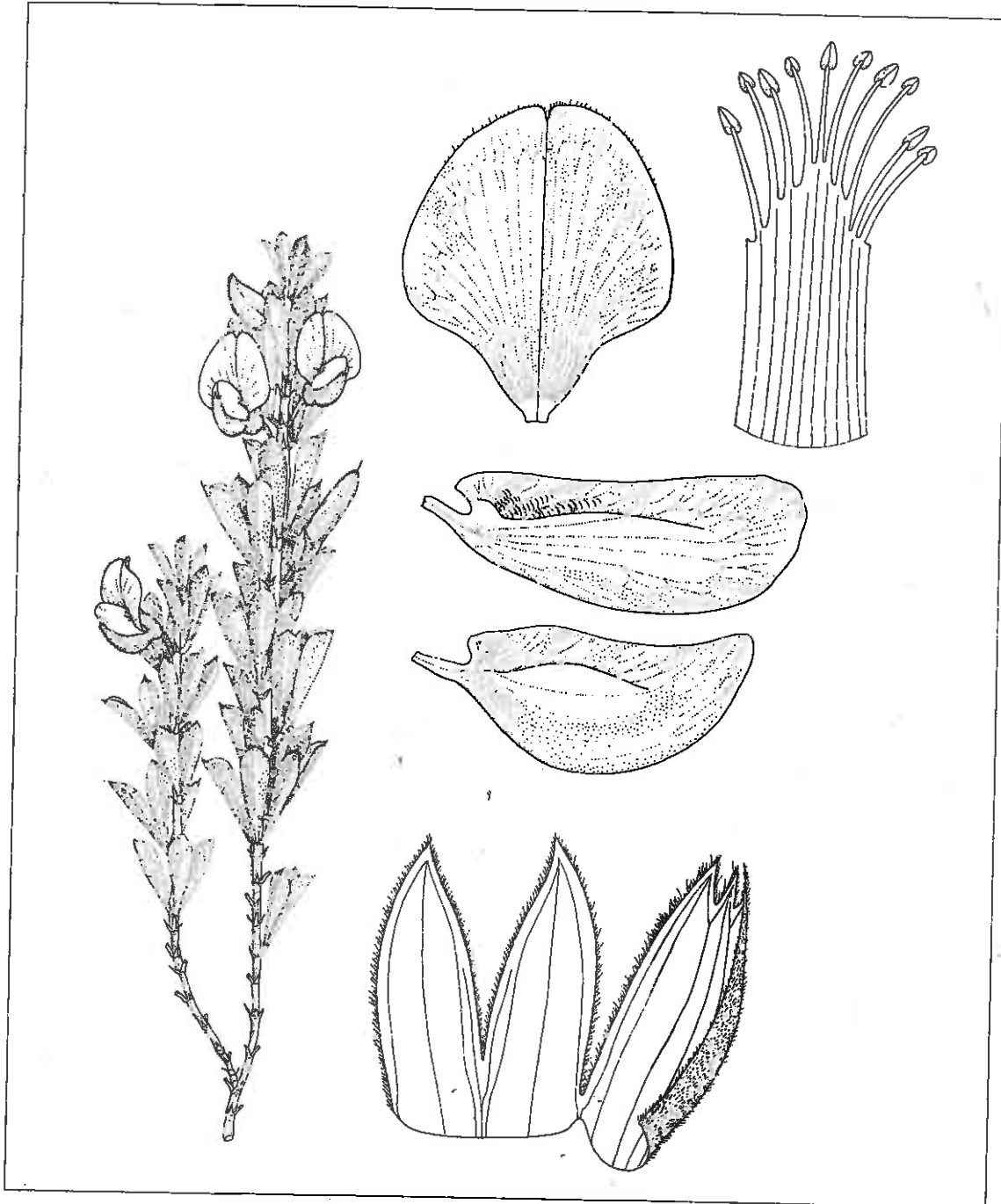


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**John Medley Wood: The Father of  
KwaZulu-Natal Botany**

**Matsikamma Mountain • Namibia's Kaokoland  
Inanda Valley • Tambotis in the Transkei**

# John Medley Wood: The Father of KwaZulu-Natal Botany

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Rudolf Strey, a former curator of the Natal Herbarium, has amongst others called John Medley Wood "the father of Natal botany". Wood founded the Natal Herbarium (Figure 2) and was an early curator of the Botanic Gardens in Durban. His work at these institutions extended well beyond administrative tasks. He collected prolifically, discovered many new species, systematically studied the flora of KwaZulu-Natal, and published a number of pioneering works. All this is more remarkable for the fact that he had no formal botanical training and commenced these endeavours in the later years of his life.

An obituary by Maurice Evans (1918), a prominent amateur botanist and colonial politician, is beautifully written and has a wonderful cadence. He recalls that Wood "had a wonderful memory not only for plants and plant names. It was a great pleasure to listen to his reminiscences of early Natal and Zululand. I often told my friend that he should embody and fix these recollections in book form. It would have been of entrancing interest to my generation and the next".

Alas, this did not occur, for Wood was uncomfortable to commit to public record the colourful tales of his time, or indeed much information about his own life.

Strey (1977) noted that information about him was "hard to get", while when once interviewed by Ergates of *The Agricultural Journal and Mining Record* in 1903, the correspondent lamented that "in the course of our conversation, interesting and amusing incidents, often connected with other old Colonists, cropped up, but at the conclusion of practically all the narrator (Wood) said: Better not put that in."

## Early life

Wood was born in 1827, in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, where he grew up. He was the first of five children born to James Ridal Wood and Hannah Weaver. His mother died when he was seven years old, and the next year his

father married Mary Haygarth, then only sixteen. This union produced a further ten children (Strey 1977).

In 1844 at the age of 17, Wood left school and began a career at sea. He served on the ship *Cordelia*, "owned by a Liverpool Mercantile firm engaged in East India trade" (Strey 1977). He must have done well in this career, for at the time of his leaving he had reached the position of acting chief officer (Brown 1915, Strey 1977). In the same year the British annexed the area between the Umzimkulu and the Tugela Rivers for strategic, certainly not economic reasons, for the colony was never profitable or particularly prosperous, except for the emergence of a farming aristocracy connected with the development of sugar estates.

Though British and European emigration to Natal was small, there was one emigration enterprise of note. It was organized by the persuasive, but imprudent and unscrupulous colonial propagandist, Joseph Byrne. "With borrowed money he opened an impressive office in London, secured the financial backing of a group of ship owners, and persuaded the Colonial Office to sanction a scheme under which he and his associates stood to gain large tracts of land in Natal." As many as 5 000 souls were transported across the sea in this way. But by September 1850



Figure 1. The father of KwaZulu-Natal botany, John Medley Wood, towards the end of his life. Photo: National Botanical Institute.



Figure 2. An elderly John Medley Wood in front of his house (completed in 1890, now the Natal Herbarium's administrative centre) with the herbarium (completed in 1902) behind, still used for that purpose. Before 1902 an unsatisfactory iron and wood-lined building was used to house the herbarium collection. Photo: National Botanical Institute.

the scheme was bankrupt. Byrne, who was once quoted as saying: "the prospect of large gains (is) too much for the human heart to resist," then made his escape to Australia (McCracken 1972).

It was on the Byrne settler ship *King William* that James Wood, his wife, and many children arrived in then D'Urban in 1850. As was the case in those days, the journey was long and rigorous. Recounting the 14 week journey, James Wood was to write:

"During the voyage we had a great deal of sickness on board, and the scarlet fever and diarrhea cut off no fewer than 18 on the voyage and about 8 have died since our arrival. We lost our dear little Lizzie buried in the broad Atlantic about 150 miles off Cape St. Rogue off the coast of South America."

With the region's flora then little known, a number of plant collectors joined the influx. One of these was Mark McKen, who arrived on the ship *Emily* in the same year. He was to become curator of the Durban Botanic Gardens before Wood and married Wood's sister Margaret (Schrire 1983, Gunn & Codd 1981).

Thomas Duff was another Byrne settler who arrived on the ship *Ina* from Glasgow. He wrote in 1850 that the town of D'Urban had then about 1 000 residents, its sandy streets mostly lined by thatch and mud-walled buildings. Climax forest then covered a large part of the Berea, in which much wildlife occurred, such as the now locally extinct and regionally very rare Delagorgue's Pigeon, which was then quite common. Elephants and other large mammals could also still be found a little distance from the town, though earlier settlers had from the 1820s made good business of exterminating whatever they could.

### Arrival in Natal

Letters sent to John Medley Wood by his family must have persuaded him to emigrate, for he arrived in Durban on the *Jane Morris* in 1852 (Evans 1918, Strey 1977). For a time Wood assisted his father with his notarial duties (Evans 1918). That year he bought a property at Otterspool at the mouth of the Umhloti, where he farmed, and as did many early settlers, organized trading expeditions across the Tugela River into Zululand (Brown 1915, Evans 1918, Gunn & Codd 1981). In 1855 he married Elizabeth Haygarth, the younger sister of his stepmother, a union that was to remain childless, though they adopted two sons and a daughter (Brown 1915, Gunn & Codd 1981, Karsten 1972).

The littoral climate being hot and rather unhealthy, in 1868, at the age of 41, he moved to farm (principally) stock at Inanda, about "20 miles inland and about 2000 feet above the sea." Here he also ran a trading store, as well as another at Itafami,



Figure 3. Circa 1914, John Medley Wood stands next to a specimen of *Encephalartos woodii* (Wood's Cycad) in the Durban Botanic Gardens. Wood found this now extinct in the wild cycad at the Ngoye Forest in Zululand in 1895. Under Wood's direction specimens were removed to the Gardens in 1903. Picture courtesy of the Durban Botanic Gardens.

beyond which was "the wild rugged Noodsberg escarpment" (Evans 1918). This was a place from which he too was to make a number of interesting plant collections, such as the type of *Orbea woodii*, from a locality now largely transformed to sugar cane and timber plantation (Walker & Downs 2000).

### Inanda

In a way perhaps unfamiliar to us now, the Victorian era was a time remarkable for its passion for science, and the investigation, discovery and classification of the natural world. Collection of ferns was a particularly popular Victorian pastime, and Wood at first had a special interest in ferns, mosses and fungi. He shared his enthusiasm for ferns with the Rev. John Buchanan, who published a list of Natal ferns in 1875, and spent time with him at Inanda (Evans 1918). By 1877 Wood published his own *A popular description of the Natal ferns: designed for the use of amateurs*, followed in 1879 by *The classification of ferns*.

By 1876, when first visited by Maurice Evans at Inanda, he had begun to collect and classify flowering plants more generally (Evans 1918). Perhaps tied to the fact that a more general interest had more recently kindled, in 1883 Katharine Saunders (wife of early sugar baron James Saunders), one of the more prominent amateur botanists in the colony, wrote in a letter that Wood "did not know nearly so many plants we passed on the road as I did." (McCracken & McCracken 1990). However, this comment was quite likely unfair and certainly boastful. It seemed

there may at least later have been some competitive schism: she collected extensively and had a particular interest in having plants named after herself and her family; she avoided the herbarium run by Wood, dispatching her specimens instead to the Bolus Herbarium in the Cape, and to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (McCracken & McCracken 1990), then even more than now the world's foremost botanical institution.

With KwaZulu-Natal's flora in the process of discovery, Wood's extensive collections at Inanda make it an important type locality; in consequence this area is commemorated in the names of a number of species.

Evans (1918) recalls Wood's home at Inanda as being "a most delightful place surrounded by wild scenery and yet with an open view of the Indian Ocean, blessed with a lovely climate seldom too hot and yet



*Crassula inandensis*, a rare species found in seep areas on the floor of coastal escarpment forest. Photo: David Styles



*Pavetta inandensis* (Forest Bride's Bush), an uncommon tree of primary forest. Photo: Geoff Nichols



*Tephrosia inandensis* with white flowers, of rank parts of coastal escarpment grassland and grassy scrub. Photo: Geoff Nichols

### Plants named after Inanda include:

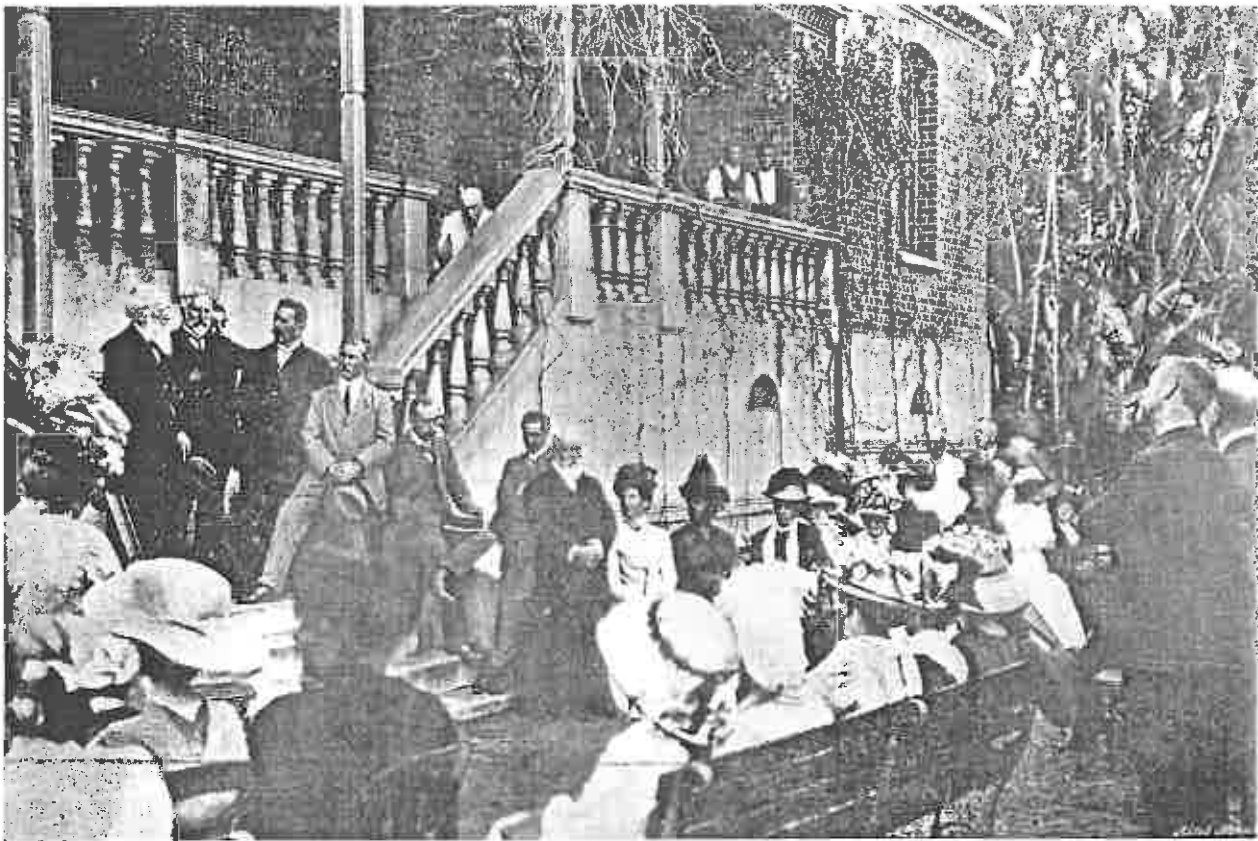
*Crassula inandensis*, a rare species of seep areas on the floor of escarpment forests; *Gladiolus inandensis*, a species of escarpment grasslands; *Pavetta inandensis*, an uncommon tree of primary forest; and *Tephrosia inandensis*, a rare species with white flowers, in rank areas of escarpment grassland and grassy scrub.

Names reduced to synonymy are *Brachystelma inandensis* (*B. natalense*); *Eulophia inandensis* (now *E. parviflora*); *Oncinotis inandense* (now *O. tenuiloba*); *Ornithogalum inandense* (probably synonymous with *O. graminifolium*); and *Scilla inandensis* (*Ledebourea cooperi*).

John Medley Wood is commemorated in the genus *Woodia* (Asclepiadaceae, now sunk into the Apocynaceae), *Woodiella* (a genus of fungus), and in the specific epithets of about sixty species.



*Gladiolus inandensis* with white flowers, of coastal escarpment grassland. Photo: Geoff Nichols



**Figure 4.** The 1913 function at the then Colonial Herbarium at which John Medley Wood's honorary doctorate was presented. Wood, with white beard, is on steps on the left. Photo: National Botanical Institute.

frost free." The site of Wood's home has never been definitely identified in publication before. The search for and discovery of this site spans a generation, and is a story in its own right, which we leave for another issue of *PlantLife*. Identification of the site helps more definitely fix the locality for many of his Inanda collections, labeled cursorily "Inanda", with little else besides sometimes a note on altitude.

Wood was fortunate during his life in enjoying excellent health and strength. His "physical powers" were of a high order" and he was a "wonderful walker" (Evans 1918). His capacity for physical exertion was certainly a great advantage in this wild terrain. One can only imagine how delightful it must have been, 130 years before us now, to walk and explore such an unspoiled place, surrounded by rolling grasslands, rugged krantzies and extensive forest seams.

By the 1880s the escarpment forests of central KwaZulu-Natal were receding, and the landscape transforming through unsustainable harvesting activities, the rapid expansion of agriculture and the planting of exotic trees. Wood, also, was not to remain at what Evans called this "ideally restful spot". Now an authority on the plants of the colony, his botanical investigations and exchanges of specimens, many new, with Kew and other herbaria, had brought him to considerable notice.

#### **Golden era**

The Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, formed in 1847, had provided financial succour to the Durban Botanic Gardens, the latter indeed having been established under its auspices. In 1891 curator Julius Wilhelm Keit, who had succeeded McKen after the latter's death in 1872, resigned "mainly because of the financial situation". There was also a "definite break between the Natal Agricultural Society and the Horticultural Society and so at an urgent meeting it was resolved to ask the Government to help finance the Garden. This was granted with the formation of the Durban Botanic Society" (Schrire 1983).

In 1882 Wood was invited by the new Committee to take over the management of the Gardens. He agreed on the basis that he could also establish a herbarium. Thus began what was known then as the Colonial Herbarium (it obtained this formal title in 1885), today known as the Natal Herbarium. Not having a horticultural background, in 1882 Wood obtained an assistant and right-hand at the Gardens in the form of the Kew-trained James Wylie. This, and support from Kew and others, enabled Wood to "direct one of the most attractive and successful botanic gardens in the British Empire" (McCracken & McCracken 1990).

In spite of his great productivity, Wood's work at the herbarium was undertaken with limited funds and little professional assistance. In 1895 he was able to





**Figure 5.** *Senecio medley-woodii* in typical krantz edge habitat in the Krantzkloof Nature Reserve. On the eve of his death Wood was busy with material of this attractive and rather rare succulent species, which had been brought to him from Krantzkloof. Photo: David Styles

employ a half-day assistant in the form of Miss F. Lauth, employing her full-time the following year. In 1901 an additional assistant was employed in the form of Miss M. Franks. However from 1907 some assistance had to be dispensed with due to lack of funds (Schrire 1983). He was also assisted with work at the herbarium by amateurs at various times, such as Maurice Evans, and by his nephew Walter Haygarth.

Excluding duplicates, Wood brought with him to the herbarium about 1 500 specimens, mostly from Inanda, which he later transferred to the herbarium collection. The herbarium collection grew steadily. By 1885 the herbarium had 3 400 specimens, of which 2 500 were South African. In 1895 there were 17 000, with 7 300 South African and by 1900 about 26 000, with 8 700 South African. In 1910 Wood recorded that the herbarium contained nearly 43 000 specimens, 12 500 of them South African (Schrire

1983).

In those days collecting expeditions were epic events, made by trundling, often arduously, through the veld by ox-wagon. McCracken and McCracken (1990) record that: "in the heyday of his collecting in the late 1880s Wood often took his wife and a large party of helpers along, the entourage taking from a month to six weeks to complete an expedition." At times, particularly as Wood grew older, Wylie was dispatched on his own to make collections, such as to fetch specimens of the cycad *Encephalartos woodii* (Wood's Cycad, Figure 3) from the Ngoye Forest in 1903, a year in which Wood was elevated to Director of the Botanic Gardens, with Wylie as Curator beneath him (Anonymous 1915). Wylie's collections, some of which represent the types of species such as *Pentas wyliei*, *Carissa wyliei* and *Cryptocarya wyliei*, are usually found labeled under Wood's numbers.

#### **Published works**

Wood's works include his 1888 *An Analytical Key to the Natural Orders and Genera of Natal Indigenous Plants* and 1894 *Preliminary Catalogue of Indigenous Plants*, up until which time "it was impossible to obtain much definite information regarding the distribution of or relative abundance of such Natal plants as had been described" (Bews 1918). *Natal Plants*, a major, illustrated work in six volumes was published between 1898 and 1912, the first volume co-authored with Maurice Evans. Each volume contained 100 species, excellently illustrated by Frieda Lauth and Millicent Franks. *A Handbook to the Flora of Natal*, appeared in 1907. Between 1882 and 1910 Wood also wrote on an annual basis, a lengthy and informative *Report on the Natal Botanic Gardens and Colonial Herbarium*.

Known for his sense of humour, Wood was a great lover of both football and cricket. He was president of the Berea Football Club (Anonymous 1915), and was reportedly as well known at Saturday afternoon matches at a local playing ground as the players themselves (Evans 1918). He has nonetheless been accused of being sometimes "rather self-opinionated" and of downplaying the contributions of others (McCracken and McCracken 1990).

#### **End of an era**

In 1913 the University of the Cape of Good Hope (later to become UNISA) awarded him an honorary doctorate (Figure 4). In the same year the botanic gardens were taken over by the Durban Municipality and the Colonial Herbarium by the South African (Union) Government, the latter being renamed the Natal Herbarium. These were inauspicious events. At the time the Director of Kew, Lieut. Col. David Prain appealed, without success, to prevent the

downgrading of the Durban Botanic Gardens (McCracken and McCracken 1990).

Wood, though no longer overseeing the gardens, continued at the helm of the herbarium. At the age of 87 he was working on a seventh volume of *Natal Plants*, and was busy on the eve of his death in 1915 with material of an undescribed *Senecio* collected from Krantzkloof. Hutchinson (1923) completed the description and in honour named the plant *Senecio medley-woodii* (Figures 5 & 6). As a sombre footnote to this rich contribution, Schrire (1983) notes that with his passing the Natal Herbarium "slipped into obscurity and for nearly fifty years its emphasis fell on plant pathology". Only with the arrival of Rudolf Strey in April of 1962 did the flame of botanical discovery re-ignite at the Durban station.

#### Acknowledgements

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**Figure 6.** Late afternoon sun catches yellow flowers of *Senecio medley-woodii* at Ximba inland of Durban. Photo: David Styles

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