KNIPHOFIA BRUCEAE

THE ELUSIVE GIANT

by J C McMaster,
The Craft Wild Bulb Nursery, Stutterheim

A maze of incredulity, awe - these words are almost inadequate to describe my first sight of this magnificent poker - its dull yellow flower spikes towering above the thick grass in the remote CwenCwe valley in the Strelitzia Forest Reserve below Mount Kemp in the King Williams Town district of the Eastern Cape. They were so enormous! The flowers towered above my head, with a thick whorl of droopy leaves up to 1.5 m long. This was truly the giant of the 'red-hot pokers' family. It was early in April 1964 when I was on a quest for the elusive black Charaxes butterfly, Charaxes kirkloof kirkloof which had been described in 1957 by N. Somerenn and Jackson, and which had been spotted on rare occasions in the forests of the Amatola mountains. Not only was I successful in tracking down the black charaxes that month, but my encounter with the giant Kniphofia was the beginning of an intriguing saga of this rare and wonderful plant.

While my main interest at this stage was butterflies, I was also establishing an indigenous garden around my new house in Stutterheim. Although there were very few of these giants at CwenCwe I removed one (I do have a permit) and planted it in my garden. It thrived and flowered every year, each time reminding me to try to discover its identity. Over the years my interest in wildflowers increased and eventually Rhoda, my wife, suggested that we

Above. The genus Kniphofia is named in honour of Johannes Hieronymus Knipho, 1704-63 who was Professor of Medicine at Erfurt University, Germany. He was interested in botany and one of his best known works was Botanica in Originali or Herbarium Vivum. It comprised 1200 botanical illustrations which were produced by a somewhat unique process whereby dried plant specimens were coated with printer's ink and pressed on paper, resulting in a silhouette effect. One of the illustrations depicts the species then known as Aloe ovata 1, which later became the type species of the genus Kniphofia.

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Left. Title page of Knipho's publication Botanica in Originali or Herbarium Vivum.
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Right. Mrs Eileen Bruce, after whom this Kniphofia is named.
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take a fresh flower to Koos Roux at the National Botanical Institute at Kirstenbosch. On 16 April 1966 Koos wrote to me: 'I had a very close look at your Kniphofia specimen from CwenCwe and decided it was K. bruceae (Codd) Codd. It is a very rare taxon and I would suggest that you keep a close watch on the plants.' This was sufficient motivation to set us on a quest for more plants and other localities. Where would we find another plant to provide pollen to fertilize our single specimen, which had never set seed?

The second specimen I came across was when we saw one flowering at Edendale Farm gate on the road between Macleintown and East London. On enquiriy I discovered that Mrs Valerie Kretzmann had transplanted it from her garden, together with other shrubs and flowers. She could not tell us its origin but it must have come from a local population nearby. She kindly gave us permission to take the flower to pollinate ours, but this proved unsuccessful - we still did not get viable seed.

Our next move was to go back to the original site in the CwenCwe valley, now under the jurisdiction of SAFCOL. In April last year, after much searching, we were thrilled to find six plants, three in flower (Illustrated here). We were saddened to see that these plants were severely threatened by pine plantations growing over them. They probably have no hope of surviving. The quest to find other locations now became an obsession and we checked all the literature with reference to herbarium specimens. We received much help from Koos Roux once again, from Tony Dowd at the Selmar Schoenland Herbarium, Grahamstown, and Jacques van Rooyen of the then Botanical Research Institute, Pretoria. We also uncovered a fascinating story going back to before 1800.

There are but three herbarium specimens of this plant - two from the same locality. The first collection was made by that intrepid collector, Henry George Flanagan in May 1894. Flanagan (1866–1919) was a prolific collector and lover of wild flowers - the considerable number and variety of species which bear his name are testimony to his dedication. He worked in close association with such eminent botanists as Prof. Macoven and Harry Bolus. He lived on the farm Prospect in the Komga district, where his descendants live to this day. On his collection No. 2323 he describes the locality as 'Grassy valleys near Komga'.

The second collection was made by Miss Eileen Bruce, after whom it was named. This became the type specimen - Bruce 804 (PRF, bols) - from Bideford Farm near Komga. In his revision of the genus in Bothalia 9, 452 (1968), Dr L. Codd describes how Miss Bruce, previously of the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, who was employed at the National Herbarium in Pretoria in the early fifties while revising the Kniphofia species, recognized the Flanagan specimen as distinct and made a special effort to locate plants. With the help of Miss Courtenay-Latimer of Coelacanth fame and G.G. Smith of East London, she eventually succeeded in 1964. They did not find it in flower however, but a plant she collected flowered the following year at Pretoria, which became the type specimen and is dated 07/04/1955. I telephoned Miss Courtenay-Latimer to check this record and she described the incident to me in detail. She was very impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm of Eileen Bruce. Bideford Farm, where she found the colony, is but a few miles from Flanagan's original home.

The only other herbarium specimen was collected by Comins on 8 April 1959. He gives the locality as 'near Kei Road' in the district of King Williams Town. Kei Road is midway between the CwenCwe valley and the Komga site, which indicates that there may be isolated populations between these two sites.

Because of its affinity with (and possible parentage of) K. præcox, the above three collections were originally classified as K. præcox subsp. bruceae by Dr Codd in his revision of the South African species of Kniphofia (Bothalia 9, 449, 1968). K. præcox was described in 1870 from a plant that was possibly of hybrid derivation, resembling specimens of unknown origin cultivated in Europe since the early part of the nineteenth century. However, in 1987 Dr Codd separated subsp. bruceae from K. præcox on the basis of several characteristics and accorded it separate species rank (Bothalia 17, 2). Dr Codd wrote, 'In view of its rarity and limited distribution, it may be questioned if K. bruceae could have been introduced into Europe before or near the beginning of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, such an introduction can be confirmed by the illustration in Jacquin's Fragmenta 1.4 (probably 1800), reproduced in Bothalia 9, 381 (1968). Although entitled Veltheimia uvaria, it is not that species, but an excellent match of the type of K. bruceae from near

Rhoda McMaster standing next to Kniphofia bruceae in April last year. The proportions of this giant and the height of its stem and length of its leaves are evident. This population in the CwenCwe valley is severely threatened by pine plantations - note the ominous intruder in the background. Photo: J C McMaster
Komba. After describing the matching characteristics, he goes on to say, 'although Jacquin does not record the origin of his plant, there can be little doubt that it must have been collected by Georg Scholl, collector for the Schönbrunn Gardens, who spent from 1786 to 1799 in South Africa, accompanied during 1786 to Feb 1787 by Franz Boas. Details of his itineraries are not known but it may be accepted that his travels took him eastwards as far as Kaffraria.'

Our next move was to find the Bideford Farm population. We were very curious to know if it was still there and how healthy and secure it was. We phoned the current owners of the farm, Jacques and Fenella du Preez. No, they knew nothing of such a plant, but we were welcome to come and explore and an elderly stockman, Ngxeki Mayama, who had lived on the farm all his life and knew the farm intimately offered to help us search. So, on 1 September, armed with the pictures in Bothalia, we set off with great anticipation. We received a very friendly reception from Jacques and Fenella and showed the pictures to Ngxeki who scrutinised them without any comment for a long while and finally indicated that he thought he might know where they were. After a drive of a few kilometres through thickly bushed, stony and hilly country, we stopped on a high point and followed Ngxeki on foot through thick bush down the hill. Sure enough – he pointed out one isolated plant – very clearly a specimen of K. bruceae almost invisible in the tall 'dobo' grass (Miscanthium capensis) between the patches of bush. A thorough search revealed no more specimens.

Undaunted, he indicated that a further hillside would have more, so back to the backside and on for another kilometre. After scrambling down another bushy hillside we came to a grassy clearing. My heart started to hammer as I perceived over a hundred dried flower stalks towering above the waist high grass. These were truly very healthy and robust specimens of the giant poker. Here at last, thanks to a wonderful old man who certainly knew the country well, we had come across probably the very same population that had been seen 1894 by Flanagan and in 1954 by Eileen Bruce. It is difficult to describe the feeling of being amongst such impressive and rare plants. All the dried stems were over 2 m high – one measured 2.53 m and its tip had broken off! The stems were all at least 3-4 cm in diameter. We cannot wait to return there this April to see them in flower.

This is not easy country to traverse. It is thick and overgrown. The countryside between Komba and King Williams Town is dissected by hundreds of bush clad valleys and thickly grassed hillslopes and it is very likely that further populations are concealed in this generally unexplored region. Subsequently, I checked with Joan Bursey, a lover and grower of wildflowers, who lives on the farm 'Lowlands' south east of Kei Road. Perhaps she had heard of Comins who had made the third collection? No, she did not know of Comins, but she did know of the giant poker. They also grow on 'Lowlands', she told us, and she would go to inspect this population to ascertain their current status. A few days later she reported that she had in fact found one colony consisting of a few plants that had flowered well this year, and she would continue to search for more. So my hunch was right - there are other populations, but how many and where are they?

It is indeed amazing that a plant so spectacular can remain so obscure for so long, and to this day has only been seen by a handful of very privileged people. Even the owners of land on which it grows are sometimes unaware of its existence. How fortunate I have been to have had a 34-year relationship with this elusive giant, and to have had the pleasure of seeing it produce wonderful flowers each year in my own wild garden at the Croft.

The author can be contacted at The Croft Wild Bulb Nursery (permit no. 10855), P O Box 61, Stutterheim, 4930, tel/fax (043) 683 2790.