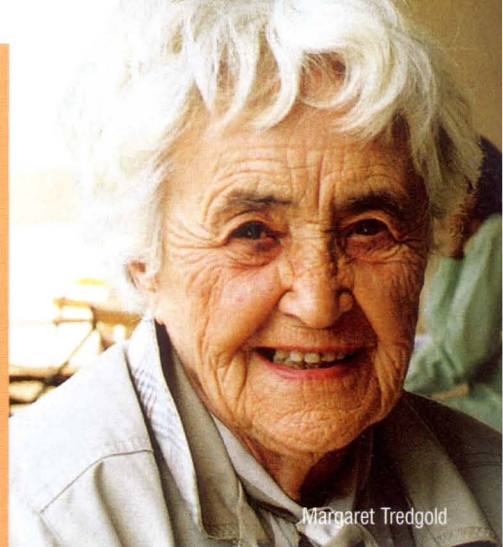


Margaret Tredgold

A remarkable Zimbabwean botanical artist and ethno-botanist



Margaret Tredgold

by Gill Scott

Margaret Helen Tredgold will be ninety-five this year. She and her six sisters grew up in the small country towns of Aliwal North and Lady Grey, which provided her first introduction to wildflowers. After leaving school, Margaret qualified as an art teacher at Grahamstown Training College and moved to Zimbabwe, then Southern Rhodesia, to take up a teaching post. Marriage to Zimbabwean advocate Bill Phear in 1934 marked a turning point in Margaret's life. She became a Zimbabwean citizen and went to live with her new husband in Bulawayo. Her love affair with the Zimbabwean flora had begun.



Food Plants of Zimbabwe appeared in 1986, with text largely written by Margaret herself and her illustrations not only of the plants but also of the traditional culinary utensils of the Shona and Ndebele people. The snot apple or tree hibiscus *Azanza garckeana* is illustrated here. The Ndebele name 'uxakuxaku' comes from the sound you make while chewing the fruit. *Food Plants of Zimbabwe* has provided the basis for experimental farming with wild fruits at the Grasslands Research Station in Marondera. In an era when GM foods are actively promoted as being the only solution to the problem of starvation in Africa, one wonders if domestication of some indigenous edible plants is not a viable alternative.

Margaret was later to write 'the Matopo Hills near Bulawayo are still largely unexplored as regards the exquisite flora and fauna flourishing around their mysterious great rock castles and ancient painted caves. In World War II this countryside was seen only as a challenge by weary young RAF trainees taken there for map-reading practice, but amongst them walked Squadron Leader Robert Martineau (a trained scientist who later became chaplain at Hillside Air Training Camp, Robert Martineau apparently always carried a flower press). Robert amazed us with the beauty and quantity of his discoveries and Margaret Phear, a "war widow" living nearby, began making water-colour portraits of the flowers, capturing the glowing colours and individual spirit of each before it faded. The children of the neighbourhood joyfully joined in wildflower collecting.'

Margaret's paintings caught the eye of Sir Robert Tredgold, President of the National Museum, who was instrumental in the publication in 1953 of *Rhodesian Wild Flowers*. This was the first pictorial record, other than photographic, of Zimbabwean flowers. The text was provided by Robert Martineau. A second revised edition appeared in 1979 with Peter Biegel and Steven Mavi, both of the National Herbarium in Harare, contributing botanical information and Shona and Ndebele plant names. A third revised edition, *Zimbabwe's Wild Flowers*, was published in 1996. Editions 2 and 3 are dedicated to Robert Tredgold, whom Margaret married in 1974 following the deaths of both their spouses. United by a common interest in the flora and folklore of Zimbabwe, their collaboration and friendship lasted for almost forty years and provided the inspiration for much of Margaret's work.

After Robert Tredgold's death in 1977, she finished a project on indigenous edible plants that they had started together. *Food Plants of Zimbabwe* appeared in 1986, with text largely written by Margaret herself and illustrations not only of the plants but also of traditional culinary utensils. Her love of her adopted country Zimbabwe, its people and its traditions illuminates both her writing and her paintings. They sparkle and bring vividly to life the time-honoured daily routines of the Shona and Ndebele people.

Of the making of *sadza* (stiff maize porridge), Margaret writes: the woman preparing *sadza* announces her intention by saying 'Tishore'. She places water in a large clay pot, *tsaiya*, over a fire on the three hearthstones, *mapfihwa*. When warm the water is mixed with a thin paste of meal, and added a little at a time, thickening progressively. The woman must

stand, not sit at her work. She stirs, *kusika*, with a special stick, *musika*, which is replaced by a flat-sided spoon, *mugoti*....

The author goes on to describe the various plant relishes that will be served as an accompaniment to the *sadza* and records the customs and protocol to be carefully observed when taking a meal. *Food Plants of Zimbabwe* is simultaneously an ethnobotanical record, a tribute to heritage and a treatise on African family and community life. It was reprinted in 1990 and will hopefully always remain available. Although Margaret modestly noted that her book was no more than an introduction to a vast subject, it nevertheless provided the basis for experimental farming with wild fruits at the Grasslands Research Station in Marondera. In an era when GM foods are actively promoted as being the only solution to the problem of starvation in Africa, one wonders if domestication of some indigenous edible plants is not a viable alternative.

From time to time Margaret travelled back to South Africa to visit friends, staying on several occasions at Buffelsfontein, the farm of Sandy Stretton in the Molteno district. Her box of water-colours was always at hand and a set of paintings of summer-blooming flowers of the Stormberg was the product of several visits there. Two of these are reproduced here, with Sandy's kind permission. This collection of some 200 water-colours is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of an under-described region of South Africa and could perhaps form the core of a new fieldguide to the flora of the area.

Elsbeth Jack, whose husband David and son Bruce produce prize-winning wines on their farm Appelsdrif near Napier, is Margaret's 'adopted daughter'. Until last year the artist visited the Jacks regularly, painting whatever fynbos species were in bloom at the time. Some of her water-colours include pollinators, particularly butterflies, another of Margaret's favourites. A set of Zimbabwean stamps, issued in 2001, depict six of Margaret's butterfly paintings while the first day cover carries charming descriptions of each species written by her.

Other stamp sets painted by Margaret appeared in 1999 and 2001. The first depicts Zimbabwean Christmas celebrations and the second African folk tales for children. Margaret and Robert Tredgold had together researched the fascinating roots of Zimbabwe's folk tales and leg-

ends, publishing some fifty of them as illustrated children's books. One was awarded the Children's Book of the Year prize at Harare International Book Fair in 2003. Margaret's stamp series depicts well-known and much-loved characters: Mvuu the hippopotamus, Kalulu the rabbit and Kamba the tortoise. Rwavi the Chameleon, a familiar figure from San and Khoi-khoi folklore, has his place in that of the Shona and Ndebele as well. The story goes that Rwavi was ordered by the Great Spirit to take the message to men that they would one day die, but like the moon would rise again and so should not fear death. Hare overheard the Great Spirit speak, but in his eagerness to be the first to deliver this important message, he set off without hearing the second part. Men were



Cyrtanthus contractus from the Molteno district of South Africa, one of a set of paintings that Margaret produced of summer-blooming flowers of the Stormberg. Reproduced with kind permission from Sandy Stretton.



Further reading

Martineau, R.A.S. (1953) *Rhodesian Wild Flowers*. Illustrated by Margaret Phear. Thomas Meikle Series Volume 1. Longmans Green, London.

Biegel, H.M. (1979) *Rhodesian Wild Flowers*. Illustrated by Margaret H. Tredgold. Thomas Meikle Series Volume 4. Trustees of the National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia, Salisbury.

Biegel, H.M. (1996) *Zimbabwe's Wild Flowers*. Revised by Susan L. Childes and illustrated by Margaret H. Tredgold. Thomas Meikle Series Volume 5. Trustees of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Tredgold, M.H. in collaboration with H.M. Biegel, S. Mavi and H. Ashton (1986). *Food Plants of Zimbabwe*. Mambo Press, Gweru.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (1967) 10th edition. Cassell, London.

so dismayed to hear that with death came the end of everything that they disbelieved Rwavi when he eventually arrived with the correct message. To this day the chameleon is regarded with fear and loathing, as a bearer of bad tidings.

Margaret's research into Zimbabwean animal stories led her to the conclusion that Aesop's fables have their origins in Africa. Traditionally ascribed to Aesop, a deformed Phrygian slave of the Sixth Century BC, these tales with a moral are thought to be far older as some are recorded in Egyptian papyri of 800-1000 years earlier. Margaret holds the view that Aesop is a corruption of Aethop i.e. the Ethiopian, who may have been taken into slavery in Egypt and later reached Phrygia (modern Turkey). It is a fascinating theory.

In later life, Margaret's trips to the bushveld to paint flowers became less frequent and she turned her attention to writing and illustrating Bible stories for her grandchildren. These were subsequently published as low cost, easily accessible and very popular paperback booklets for the children of Zimbabwe.

Sadly, in September 2004, changing circumstances in Zimbabwe led to Margaret's having to leave the country that had been her home for seventy years. She now lives with her daughter Shirley in England. The same indomitable spirit and lively interest in new places that first took her to Zimbabwe has accompanied her to a new home. She leaves behind her in Zimbabwe most of her life's work, donated as she put it 'as a gift to the children of Africa, all races, in joyful thanks for a long, exciting and creative life, in a great and ever-changing continent.' 🐢

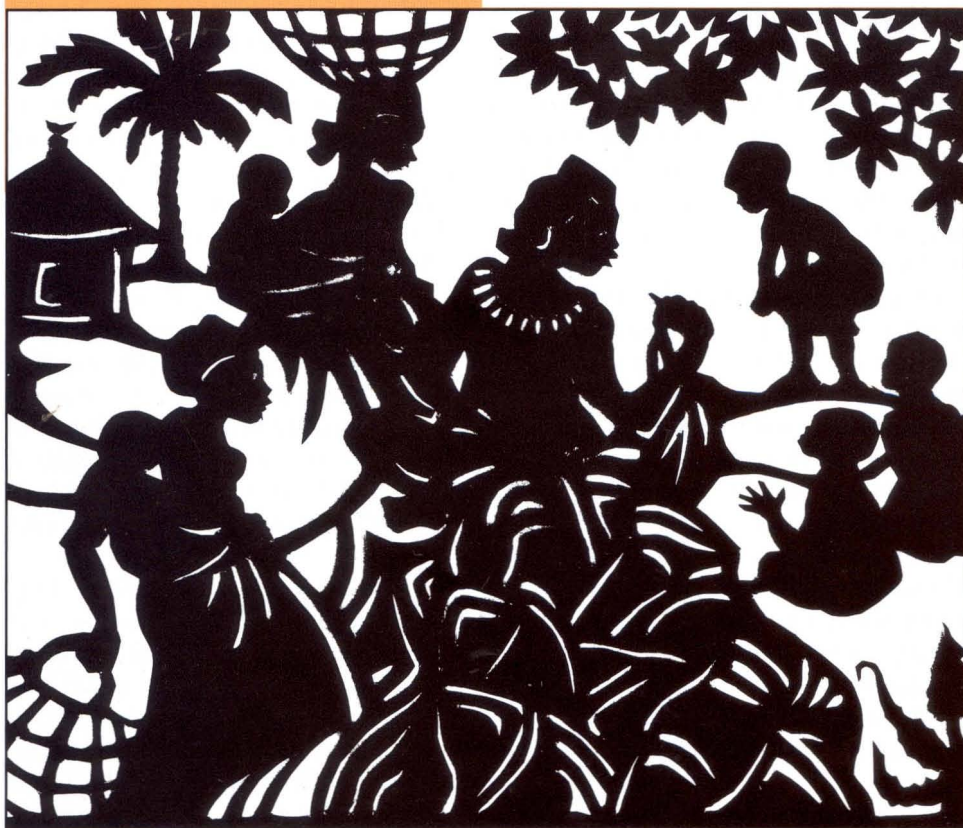


OPPOSITE PAGE: While visiting friends in the Molteno district of South Africa, Margaret produced a set of paintings of summer-blooming flowers of the Stormberg including this *Pachycarpus concolor*. Reproduced with kind permission from Sandy Stretton.

OPPOSITE BELOW: One of the Zimbabwean stamp sets Margaret illustrated depicts some well-known and much-loved characters of African folk tales: Mvuu the hippopotamus, Kalulu the rabbit and Kamba the tortoise.

RIGHT: A plate depicting Zimbabwean Iridaceae illustrated by Margaret Tredgold in the 1979 issue of *Rhodesian Wild Flowers* by H. M. Biegel and Steven Mavi. From left to right, *Lapeirousia odoratissima*, *Moraea carsonii*, *Babiana hypogaea*, *Freesia grandiflora* and *Lapeirousia erythrantha*.

BELOW: Detail of an intricate scissor-cut silhouette by Margaret Tredgold illustrating the proverb 'She is sewing a kaross' i.e. she is spinning out a long story. Margaret and Robert Tredgold had together researched the fascinating roots of Zimbabwe's folk tales and legends; publishing some fifty of them as illustrated children's books.



Margaret's research into Zimbabwean animal stories led her to the conclusion that Aesop's fables have their origins in Africa. Traditionally ascribed to Aesop, a deformed Phrygian slave of the Sixth Century BC, these tales with a moral are thought to be far older as some are recorded in Egyptian papyri of 800-1000 years earlier.