

## A PASSION FOR PROTEAS

### The botanical art of Louise Guthrie.

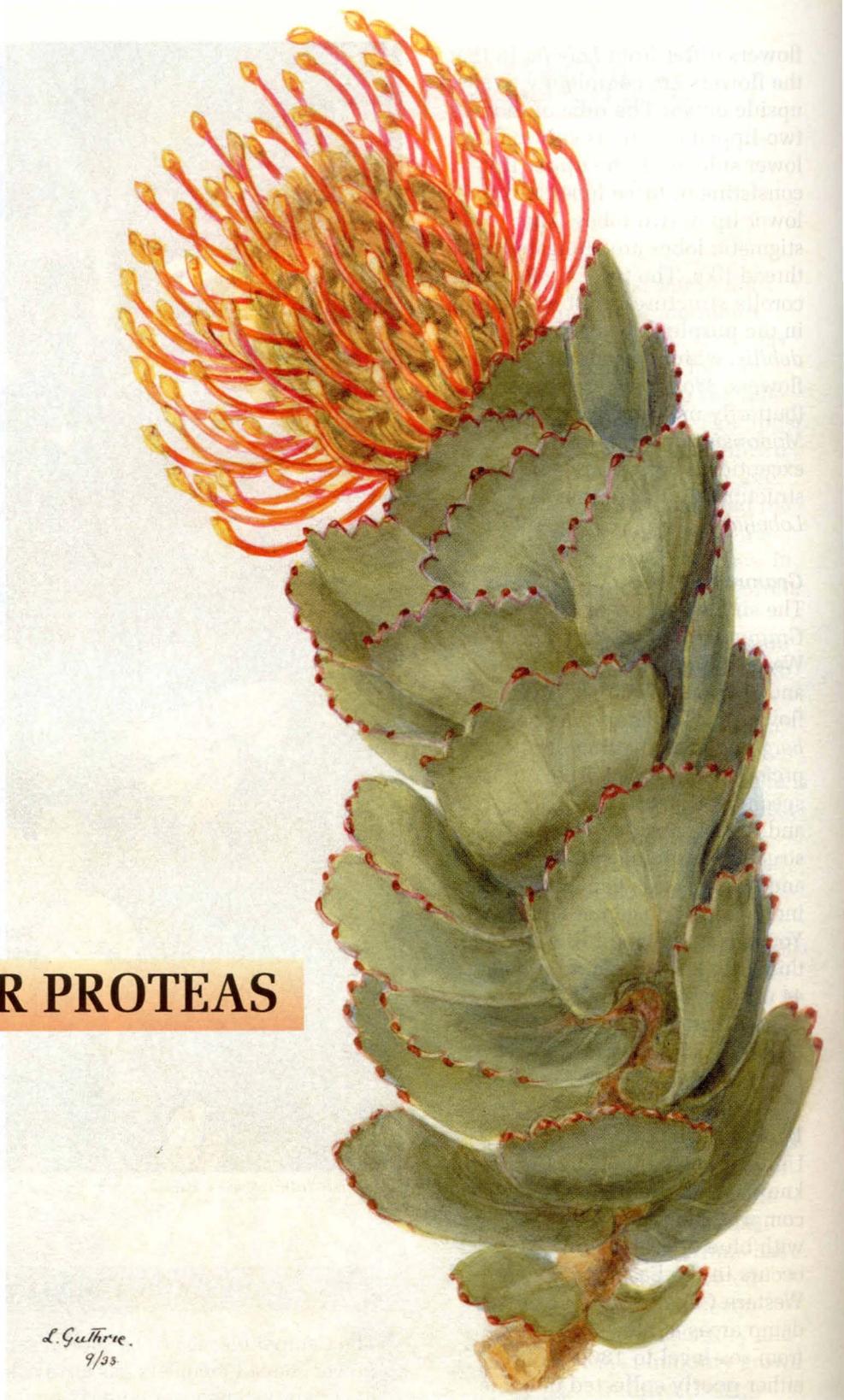
by **John Rourke**,  
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If you meander down the corridors of South Africa House in Trafalgar Square, London, you may notice, among various artworks on the walls, some water-colours depicting Cape wildflowers. Signed L. Guthrie, they were, until recently, among the only examples of Louise Guthrie's paintings on public display. The main body of her work, some 264 illustrations of South African Proteaceae, has lain largely unseen for sixty years in the Bolus Herbarium and latterly in the

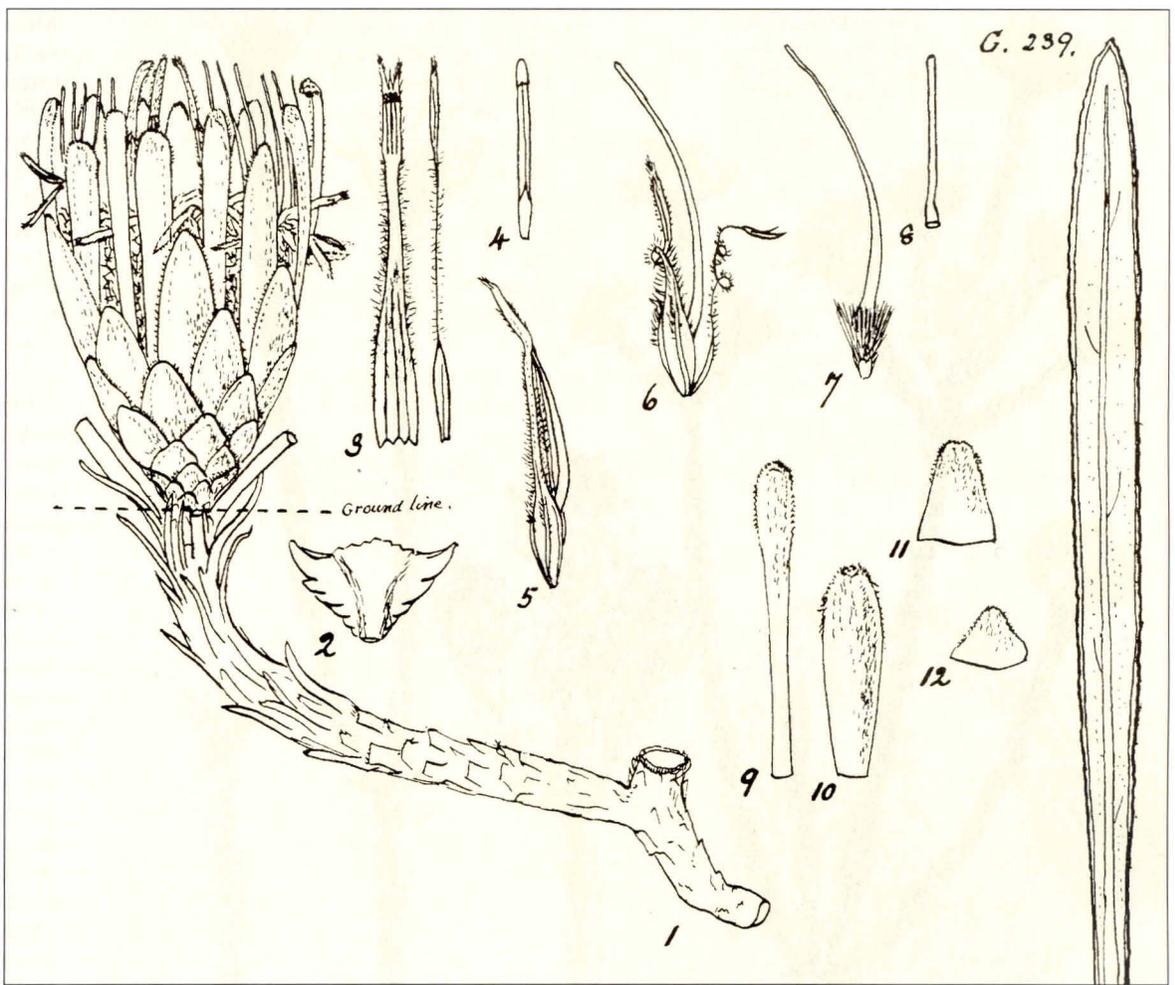
archives of the University of Cape Town. Now, after a week long exhibition of seventy-six of these paintings arranged in April 2000 by the Hermanus Botanical Society at Fernkloof, her work has at last been brought to the attention of an appreciative public.

It was in the Bolus Herbarium during my student years in the early 1960s that I first encountered the Guthrie paintings. The Proteaceae was a research interest of mine so I was delighted to discover that the

creator of this exceptional record was still alive and living at Caledon. A visit was arranged to meet Miss Guthrie. Thus it was that in November 1964 I drove to Caledon with a fellow student, Ted Oliver, to call on the eighty-five year old artist. Though rather frail, she spoke animatedly about her passion to paint all the South African Proteaceae. *Leucadendron cryptocephalum* discovered on Shaw's Pass near Caledon by Louise herself and later described by her in the



Left  
*Leucospermum patersonii* painted by Louise Guthrie. Right  
Pen and indian ink drawings by Louise Guthrie showing the dissected floral parts of *Protea scabra*.



*Journal of South African Botany*, was a source of particular pride and interest. I left that afternoon with pleasant memories of a remarkably talented lady; a gift in the form of a painting of *Serruria aitonii*, and a great desire to know more about this unassuming botanical artist.

Isobel Louise Sophie Guthrie, the fourth child of Francis Guthrie and Isabella Grisbrook was born in Cape Town on 10 October 1879 where her father had recently been appointed Professor of Mathematics at the South African College. The family had previously lived in Graaff-Reinet. It was in this historic Karoo town that Prof. Guthrie had developed an abiding interest in botany, having arrived there in 1861 to teach mathematics at the newly established college. In fact, it was Guthrie who encouraged another Graaff Reinet resident, Harry Bolus, to take up botany as a mental diversion after the death of Bolus' young son.

Guthrie was a man of wide intellectual interests. He had graduated with a BA and LLB from London University and although he worked for some time in London as a barrister he soon abandoned law and devoted the remainder of his

life in South Africa to his principal preoccupations, mathematics and botany. Much of Guthrie's mathematical fame rests on his 1852 proposition known as the Four Colour Conjecture. This seemingly intractable problem was only solved in 1976 with the use of massive computer calculations (Appel, K. & Haken, W. 1989. Every planar Map is four colorable. *American Mathematical Society*, 98, 1-2.).

In 1875 the Guthries settled in Cape Town on the farm Raapenberg, overlooking the Black River, near the present day road interchange between Pinelands and Mowbray. Here Louise spent her early childhood in what were then rural surroundings, with the fascinating Cape Flats flora on her doorstep. She seems to have taken an interest in plants at an early stage, probably strongly influenced by her father, who was by then actively collaborating with Harry Bolus on their mammoth account of *Erica* for the *Flora Capensis*.

As a teenager, Louise matriculated from the newly established Rustenburg Girls High School which clearly provided her with a thorough education as she was capable of writing lengthy Latin

descriptions of new plant species, apparently without any difficulty. Art lessons must surely have also played a part in her formal schooling.

At the age of twenty, a major upheaval occurred in Louise's life. Her father, Prof. Francis Guthrie died in October 1899. Raapenberg was let to tenants while Louise and her mother went to live in Caledon with her eldest brother, Francis Alexander Charles Guthrie (founder of the well-known firm of Overberg attorneys, Guthrie & Theron). By the end of December 1899 the new house being built by Francis (or Frank as he was usually known) was nearing completion. 'Alandale', the Guthrie residence in Caledon, became her home and it was here that she painted the colour plates we see today. Indeed, she spent the greater part of her adult life either in Caledon or at the family holiday home, Glen Varloch at Hermanus near the mouth of the Mossel River, travelling between them via Shaw's Pass and that most seductively beautiful of valleys, Hemel-en-Aarde, where specimens for painting could be gathered at every bend in the road.

Once established in Caledon



*Leucadendron corymbosum* painted by Louise Guthrie.

Mrs Louisa Bolus had been appointed curator of the herbarium. So it was perhaps not unexpected that Mrs Bolus should employ the daughter of her uncle's closest friend as a member of the herbarium staff. The herbarium proved to be a stimulating intellectual environment; it also gave Louise a solid grounding in basic plant systematics which resulted in her publishing some seventeen new species of flowering plants (mostly Ericaceae and Proteaceae) in *Annals of the Bolus Herbarium*. Perhaps more importantly, this involvement with the Bolus Herbarium brought Louise into contact with Mary Page, who ranks among the most brilliantly talented botanical artists to have worked in South Africa. (Miss Page was at that time Mrs Bolus' botanical artist.) No doubt all these factors played a part in Louise re-focusing her life to combine her taxonomic and artistic skills into a worthwhile project where both could be utilized.

In 1927 she resigned from her post in the herbarium, returning to Caledon where she spent the remainder of her life living with the family of her brother Francis. At first sight it seemed

there was regular correspondence between Louise and the ageing Harry Bolus, with Bolus encouraging the young woman in her artistic endeavours. Painting and drawing were clearly her principal outlets during her early twenties. In a letter to Harry Bolus in 1899 she wrote 'When once we are settled I intend to get up a class for drawing & painting. I am told that I ought to get lots of pupils, as there is no one

here who teaches from life at all and there are many girls anxious to learn.'

Louise sent paintings of orchids and other plates to Bolus and in return he sent gifts of books, some of them botanical works. The Bolus/Guthrie connection provided the next significant opening for Louise. In 1918 she joined the staff of the Bolus Herbarium. Harry Bolus had died in 1911, but his niece,

as if her productive life had entered a *cul-de-sac*. But this was not so. Instead, she embarked upon the most creative phase of her life, pursuing a vision that resulted in the splendid collection of 264 botanical illustrations of South African Proteaceae.

On 8 October 1930, Louise wrote to Mrs Bolus requesting the loan of Volume 5 of the *Flora Capensis* (covering the Proteaceae). The

classification set out in this book was to serve as the blue print for her grand plan, which was to paint all the known species of southern African Proteaceae. Caledon, being almost at the centre of diversity for the family in our region, was the ideal operational base. She continued, 'When I have got my scheme in shape I will be glad to show you what I am attempting and invite your opinion of the same, the idea has been taking a strong hold of me lately and I am very keen on making a start'. In fact, she had made a start as early as August 1925 - the earliest dated plate. This established the size of the plates at 177 x 280 mm, a format that was thereafter used for the entire collection.

The majority were completed over a decade between 1930 and 1940; a few were painted in the early 1940s; the last was dated October 1947. Most of the specimens illustrated were collected in the veld by Louise herself. Others, especially from beyond the confines of the Caledon district, were obtained by Frank Guthrie while T.P. Stokoe, Capt. T.M. Salter and Prof. R.H. Compton gathered some of the more 'difficult to find' high altitude species. Voucher specimens bearing the artist's collecting number are all preserved in the Bolus Herbarium. Finally, in July 1948, Louise Guthrie brought her great project to a close. The 264 colour plates each accompanied by detailed pen and ink drawings of the dissected floral parts and catalogued according to the 1912 *Flora Capensis* account of the Proteaceae, were donated to the Bolus Herbarium. There they remained until a few years ago when they were transferred to the University of Cape Town archives.

Miss Guthrie continued to produce occasional botanical illustrations but she became progressively more confined to her home in Caledon where she died in February 1966 in her eighty-seventh year.

Why were the Guthrie plates never published? In 1948, post-war austerity was very real; the technology of inexpensive colour printing still in its infancy while the market for specialized botanical books was extremely limited. By the time these circumstances had changed in the 1960s and 1970s, so many new species in the Proteaceae had been discovered and described (approximately 354 species are presently recognized) that what

started out as a comprehensive collection was now merely two thirds complete. It is a sad story where timing and economic conditions conspired to thwart the artist's noble intentions.

Her soft outlines, almost impressionistic brush work and rich, intense tones result in images that are not as intimidatingly scientific as the work of some botanical artists. Louise was especially adept at capturing those subtleties of form, texture and conformation that go to make up what one may call the personality of a plant species. She understood her subjects with the eye of a botanist yet she immortalized them with the hand of an artist.

Apart from the main collection of Miss Guthrie's work in the U.C.T. archives and some examples in South Africa House, London, a number of her botanical paintings are owned by members and descendants of the Guthrie family with a few others in private hands. ♡

#### Acknowledgements

I am much indebted to Mrs Joy Guthrie Roberts of Hermanus and other members of the Guthrie family for obtaining photographs of Louise Guthrie as well as biographical information. Mrs Lesley Hart of the Dept. of Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town gave me access to the Guthrie paintings and permission to reproduce them. She also assisted in tracing correspondence between Harry Bolus and Louise Guthrie, while Dr Peter Bruyns of the Dept. of Mathematics, University of Cape Town, kindly provided information on Francis Guthrie's mathematical interests.

A list of references and further reading is available on request from the Editor, tel (021) 794 4391 or [Voget@kingsley.co.za](mailto:Voget@kingsley.co.za).



Right  
**Louise Guthrie at about the age of nineteen, circa 1898.**  
 Below  
**The Guthrie family setting off from Caledon to their Hermanus holiday home, circa 1910.**

