

Under *the* Microscope

AT THE HERBARIUM

ADVANCING SCIENCE



The labours of Jocelyn Townrow

Jocelyn Elizabeth Suzanne Townrow formulated no new theories and made no great discoveries. And yet she warrants our attention. For, as a collection of papers held by the Tasmanian Herbarium shows, this homegrown botanist was both an intelligent and industrious researcher; and a thorough and thoughtful teacher – one of the many toilers whose labours are integral to the steady advance of science.

Born in New Zealand in 1932, Jocelyn Townrow grew up on the Isle of Wight. After finishing her schooling, she gained a degree in agricultural botany at the University of Reading, where she met her husband, John, with whom she went on to have three children. In 1960, having lived for a time in Nigeria, she moved with her family to Hobart, where, at the University of Tasmania, she completed her doctorate and worked as a lecturer and researcher until her retirement in 1983.

During her tenure, Townrow taught hundreds of young botanists and spent countless hours studying Tasmania's grasses. The extent of her work as a researcher is evident in her papers. Donated to the Herbarium by her daughter, Deborah, this collection contains material Townrow gathered and prepared while studying a genus of grasses then known as *Stipa* (now called *Austrostipa*).

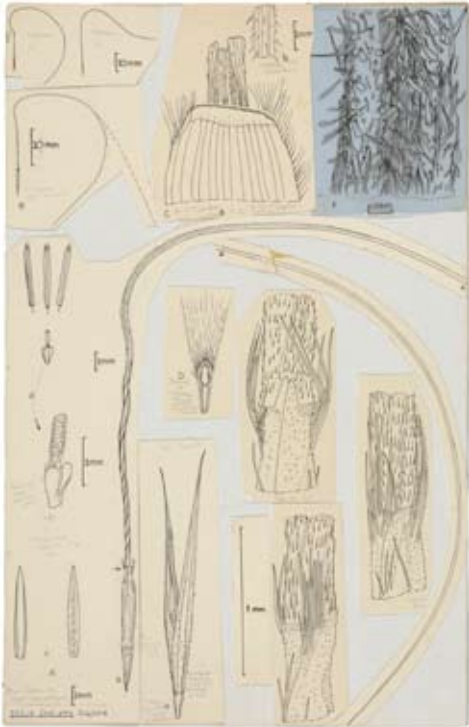
At its heart are three hundred pages of detailed notes that record her observations of *Stipa*, along with numerous sketches, photographs and letters. These are accompanied by five hundred pen-and-ink drawings (made with a practiced hand, a perceptive eye and great patience), as well as hundreds of the drawings laid-out 'for publishing', and almost as many black-and-white photographs.

Lastly, three large hand-drawn maps attest to labour of a different kind. Based upon her own collections of *Stipa* – made during her many excursions into the field – these show, in some detail, the distribution of these grasses on Bruny and Maria Islands, and in an area around Buckland, in south-eastern Tasmania.



Townrow worked tirelessly to understand and classify *Stipa* in her own right. On occasion, though, she felt the need to seek information or advice from other botanists. Indeed, her letters reveal that she went to great lengths to solve the perplexing nomenclatural problems that arose in the course of her work. (The same letters also testify to the characteristic collegiality of botanists the world over.)

In August 1973, for example, she sought advice on one such 'taxonomic tangle' from the Deputy Keeper of the Herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England, who duly replied, 'I am very happy to help where I can'. With his assistance, and that of several other far-flung botanists, Townrow ultimately untangled the identity of the species in question.



Fortunately, such toil was not in vain. For Townrow wrote and published five scholarly papers, four of which dealt with *Stipa*. In these she first recognised one (probably two) species of *Stipa* in Tasmania, and elevated another from the rank of sub-species. Significantly, these changes are still reflected in the taxonomy of the state's plants.

Her fifth paper, however, was her most important. Published in 1969, 'A Species List of and Keys to the Grasses in Tasmania' replaced Leonard Rodway's *Flora* of 1903 as the sole scientific guide to the state's grasses. (It would remain so for the next twenty years.) This paper contained not only revised listings of native and endemic grasses, but also the details of many introduced grasses.

For twenty years Townrow worked as a lecturer in the University's Department of Agricultural Science. Her former students, many of whom now work with plants, remember her as a tall, softly spoken woman whose manner was both genial and earnest. Her lectures, they recall, were invariably orderly and informative, while her classes often featured practical exercises such as the modelling of grasses using wire and foam.

For some of her students, Townrow's influence was felt in other ways. A founding member of the British Lichen Society, she shrewdly introduced Gintaras Kantvilas (now an eminent lichenologist and Head of the Tasmanian Herbarium, a division of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) to his future supervisor and mentor, thereby setting the young Kantvilas on the path to a career in botany.

In the early seventies Townrow met Ian Geard, a fellow member of the Institute of Agricultural Science. Together they sailed racing dinghies and created 'Darrow', a distinctive homestead set on eighteen acres of land near Sandfly.



After her retirement, Townrow developed an interest in alternative health therapies and served as State President of the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture, and as a Trustee of the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens. She died in April 2006, having made her mark on the botanists and botany of Tasmania, and leaving behind a collection of papers that illuminates both her work and the workings of science itself.