

# THE KIRSTENBOSCH STORY

By PHILLIDA BROOKE

*(Photographs by Richard Simons)*

On a late summer day in the year 1811 William Burchell, explorer and botanist, took a walk from Wynberg, where he was staying with friends, to a high part of the hill overlooking Kirstenbosch estate. "The view from this spot," he wrote later, "and indeed all the scenery around is the most picturesque of any I have seen in the vicinity of Cape Town. The beauties here displayed could scarcely be represented by the most skilful pencil . . ."

Exactly a hundred years later another great botanist, travelling this time by Cape cart along the lower road past Bishopscourt, made a pilgrimage to the same place. This was Professor Harold Pearson of the South African College and he had come, with two friends and colleagues, to choose a site for a national botanic garden for South Africa. He looked across a wide sweep of overgrown vineyards and tangled pear orchards to the wooded ravines and splendid buttresses of Table Mountain and he knew he need go no further. This, he determined, would become South Africa's Kew of which he had dreamt ever since his arrival in this country eight years before.

It was in November, 1910, while addressing the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, that Professor Pearson had first brought to public notice the urgent need for establishing a national botanic garden which would be devoted to the cultivation, preservation and scientific study of indigenous plants. It was true that the country boasted many beautiful public gardens but few of these spared more than a corner to the flora of South Africa which, although second to none in interest, variety and charm, was fast disappearing owing to neglect and wanton destruction.

The professor's inspired address was reported widely but it was over two years before Sir Lionel Phillips, M.P. moved before the House of Assembly in Cape Town, that "this Government should consider the advisability of setting aside a piece of ground at Kirstenbosch for the establishment of a national botanic garden." The motion was carried unanimously and in less than a month the assistance of the Government was assured. It was obvious, however, that as its £1,000 annual grant-in-aid would be insufficient to establish the garden, the public would have to dig into its own pockets and provide the rest. Thus it was that on June 10th, 1913, the Botanical Society



*(Photo: Richard Simons)*

*Backed by the sublime grandeur of the eastern buttresses of Table Mountain, the setting of Kirstenbosch might well be the envy of botanical gardens all over the world.*

of South Africa came into being. Its primary object was to raise funds, through subscriptions, for the upkeep and development of the gardens but it aimed, too, at encouraging the study of botany and fostering public interest in what was being done at Kirstenbosch.

In August of that year Professor Pearson assumed the honorary directorship of the National Botanic Gardens; he and Mrs. Pearson moved in to a make-shift dwelling at Kirstenbosch and before Spring had woken the first daisies on the slopes of Table Mountain the great work of clearing, digging and planting was begun.

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Nobody knows how the name "Kirstenbosch" originated. Some think that the estate was owned by a man named Kirsten who was Dutch East India Company Resident at False Bay in van der Stel's day or it may have belonged to a Jan Frederick Kirsten who mortgaged the farm "Veldhuizen" (now Feldhausen Estate in Claremont) in 1796. It is certain, however, that the hedge of wild almond (*Brabeium stellatifolium*), parts of which may still be seen in the gardens today, was planted at the order of Jan van Riebeeck to form the southern-most boundary of the little colony. A garrison was stationed nearby whose duty it was to protect colonists against a band of marauding Hottentots from Hout Bay. Great indigenous forests stretched up the lower slopes of Table Mountain and provided timber for ship-building and domestic use.

The garrison moved away but Kirstenbosch remained state property until 1811 when it was divided into two portions, each of approximately 107 morgen. The British were in occupation at the Cape and one of these subdivisions of Kirstenbosch was granted to Henry Alexander who succeeded Andrew Barnard as Colonial Secretary and who built himself a new home on the site of the present tea-house. According to legend, there were no windows in the bedrooms as Alexander maintained that people went to sleep there and not to look at the view. The second, or upper portion of land, was granted to Colonel Christopher Bird, Alexander's successor, and this included the beautiful little spring marked on the map as "de fontein". Seven years after moving to Kirstenbosch Alexander died and soon afterwards Bird returned to England. His house was abandoned and gradually fell into decay and all that is left of it today are a few fragments of the foundations.

Alexander's somewhat unhygienic abode, however, experienced a happier fate. In 1823 it was acquired by Dirk Gysbert Eksteen, a member of a well-known Cape family the founder of which had been an officer in the Company's army well over a century before. Mr. Eksteen altered the farmhouse and in its place there rose a fine Cape-Dutch type of homestead with wide, welcoming doors and lofty windows with a splendid view towards the east. This became one of the happy social centres for which 19th century Cape Town was famous. Croquet parties and hunting were favourite occupations and the family's reputation for hospitality continued through the generations, culminating with the gracious hostess-ship of Mrs. Henry Cloete,

Dirk Gysbert Eksteen's grand-daughter. It was during those genial and generous days at Kirstenbosch that many of the oaks were planted; a lone kaffir boom and some tangled flowering shrubs are relics of the same period and Mr. Eksteen that we have to thank for the paving of the beautiful little "fontein" pool from which flows the loveliest stream in the gardens. Vineyards stretched over the hillsides and there were apricots and pears, poultry and puddings in abundance.

But in 1895 all this came to an end. Cecil John Rhodes bought Kirstenbosch as part of his scheme to preserve the eastern slopes of Table Mountain for the people of South Africa. A caretaker was put in charge and pigs in their thousands rooted in the swamps and among the fallen acorns. The Eksteen-Cloeie homestead fell into ruin, weeds grew in the orchards and bush obscured the dimpled beauty of the little paved pool.

This, then, was what confronted Professor Pearson when he began to clear the area of undergrowth and pigs and transform the wilderness into the order of a scientific garden. He began with what is now known as "the Dell", planting cycads, on which he was an authority, in an amphitheatre round it. Bush was cut away and the pool reappeared to become one of the gardens' favourite beauty spots. Very little money was available and Professor Pearson had to accommodate his work at Kirstenbosch to his lecturing timetable at the University, seven miles away. He was on horseback before breakfast, riding over the estate, planning and inspecting and often planting with his own hands. He gave of himself unsparingly and the fruits of his labour of love — for his was a honorary appointment — were just beginning to manifest themselves when, in November, 1916, Cape Town heard, with the shock of tragedy, of his death after a short illness at the age of only 46. His grave lies in one of the most lovely corners of the gardens. Below it nestles the fern-shaded Dell; beyond stretch the banks of vivid arctotis, ursinia and mesembrianthemum reaching down to the lawn with its tranquil ponds and sentinel oaks. Few who read the inscription on his tombstone — "If ye seek his monument, look around" — can fail to be moved, for it is to the foresight and zeal of Harold Pearson that the creation of Kirstenbosch is so largely due.

The first world war was raging in Europe and it was not until 1919 that Professor R. H. Compton, then in his early thirties, arrived from England to assume directorship and he and Mr. J. W. Mathews, first curator at Kirstenbosch, were responsible for an enormous amount of development in the gardens. Cobble stones for the paths were brought by mule-drawn sled from the upper area of Kirstenbosch which was granted to the gardens in 1922 and which extended to the very summit of the mountain. Water that had rushed unchecked down gullies leaving erosion in its wake was guided into storm-water drains; swamps were transformed into lawns and lily ponds; steep hillsides were terraced and planted with protea and daisies, aloes and heath. In 1921 the first offshoot of Kirstenbosch, the Karroo Gardens at Matjiesfontein, was acquired and here xerophytes, particularly succulents, were culti-

vated under conditions better suited to them than those of Kirstenbosch. Two years later nature studies classes were started in the gardens and in 1924 the academic work of Kirstenbosch expanded still further when the herbarium was opened. Seeds, plants and bulbs were sent from every part of South Africa to be cared for in nursery and glasshouse and planted out in that part of the gardens where they would be most likely to flourish. All this was achieved despite the frustrating financial limitations imposed upon Professor Compton and his workers by the aftermath of the war, with its reduction in the Government grant, the depression of the late 1920's and the outbreak of the second world war.

After 34 years at Kirstenbosch Professor Compton retired to be succeeded in 1954 by Professor H. B. Rycroft under whose energetic and enthusiastic directorship the gardens continue to flourish and to expand. In 1945 the Karroo Gardens had moved to Worcester and, by a donation of land from Mr. C. H. Heatlie and the Municipality of Worcester in 1957, their area was increased from 32 to 280 acres. During the same year Kirstenbosch benefited by two other gifts. These were the Darling Flower Reserve, famed for its superb beauty in springtime, which was presented by Mr. 'Tienie' Versveld and the Cape Flats Flora Reserve, the gift of Miss Edith Stephens, herself a botanist of repute and one of Professor Pearson's students. Two years later Kirstenbosch assumed control of the Harold Porter Botanic Reserve with its splendid varieties of protea, and in 1961 Hangklip Beach Estates presented the gardens with Disa Kloof. Both these two reserves are at Betty's Bay, approximately 60 miles from Cape Town.

Now Kirstenbosch, perhaps the most beautiful and certainly one of the most renowned botanic gardens in the world, is planning the celebrations of its Golden Jubilee in 1963. On Professor Pearson's birthday — 28th January.

*EDITOR'S NOTE.—Although "Koedoe" is essentially concerned with the publication of articles on National Parks only, two worthy exceptions have been made in this number.*

*It is a great pleasure to convey the good wishes of the National Parks Board to this great institution on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.*