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1936

Story: Curtis, Kathleen Maisey

— fellow of Royal Society 1936

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Curtis, Kathleen Maisey

1892–1994

Mycologist

This biography was written by Lesley L. Rhodes and was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 4, 1998

Kathleen Maisey Curtis, who later became Lady Rigg, was an exemplary scientist who specialised in mycology and botany and was a founder of plant pathology in New Zealand. She was an inspiration to women scientists who succeeded her.

She was born in Foxton, Manawatu, on 15 August 1892, to Mary Emma Armitage and her husband, Paul Curtis, a postmaster. As a girl Kathleen sometimes accompanied her father on horseback when he became a postal inspector. She was educated at Lyttelton West School from 1899 to 1902, Auckland Girls' Grammar School and Auckland University College. In 1914 she

graduated BA with a Senior Scholarship in botany, and in 1915 MA with first-class honours in botany. Her academic excellence led to her becoming the first New Zealand woman to receive the 1851 Exhibition Scholarship. She also won the Orient Steam Navigation Company's travelling scholarship, which paid her fare to the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London, and the National Research Scholarship, which she declined. She sailed to London in 1915. The Exhibition Scholarship was later extended. She was awarded the Huxley Gold Medal for research and further college scholarships on completion of her diploma of the Imperial College.

Kathleen Curtis was the first New Zealand woman to gain a DSc, conferred by the University of London in 1919. Her thesis, on the cause of wart disease in potatoes, was considered the most outstanding mycological research of the decade. Her achievements were recognised by her election, in 1936, as the first woman fellow (later senior fellow) of the Royal Society of New Zealand. Curtis was also elected a

fellow of the Linnean Society of London for her contributions to botanical research.

The Cawthron Institute, Nelson, was officially opened on 2 April 1921. Kathleen Curtis had already accepted employment as mycologist in April 1920, in the Department of Biology headed by R. J. Tillyard. Her appointment followed that of the agricultural chemist Theodore Rigg. From 1928 Curtis headed the newly formed Department of Mycology at Cawthron and, in 1929, attended the Imperial Mycological Conference in London. She also represented Cawthron at the 1948 Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science conference in Hobart. She was to remain at the institute for her entire career, living with her mother for much of that time.

Her 23 publications during the 1920s and 1930s included treatises on fireblight and black-spot of pome fruit, on the fungal-induced die-back of *Pinus radiata*, and on black root-rot in tobacco. Diseases that were a direct threat to the Nelson region's economy, such as tomato and tobacco mosaic virus, were described and sprays and fertilisers for their control evaluated. During that period she supervised experiments at the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research's Tobacco Research Station, Riwaka. *Claustula fisheri curtis*, a puff-ball fungus she described in 1926 from specimens found in the Fringe Hill locality, carries her name.

She attended the inaugural meeting of the Nelson branch of the New Zealand Federation of University Women (NZFUW) in 1944. Curtis was president of the branch from 1954 to 1956 and joined a New Zealand delegation to the conference of the International FUW in London in 1953. She persuaded the NZFUW to join the National Council of Women of New Zealand and through them advocated the extension of jury service to women.

Kathleen Curtis retired in December 1952. On 2 December 1966, in the Chapel of the Holy Evangelists, Nelson, she married Theodore Rigg, who by this time had been a director of the Cawthron Institute and appointed a KBE. She was 74, he a widower of 78. Theodore belonged to the Society of Friends and the service blended Quaker custom with Anglican tradition. He died less than six years later, on 22 October 1972, but not before he and Kathleen had enjoyed their mutual love of music and travel together.

As Lady Rigg, Kathleen survived until the age of 102, spending her last 14 years in Whareama Home, Nelson. Suffrage Centennial Year, 1993, brought further recognition of her life's work when, at the age of 100, she was remembered as a pioneer plant scientist. In 1994 a portrait of her as a young DSc graduate was painted by Colin Allen and hung in the Royal Society's headquarters in Wellington. Bishop Peter Sutton paid tribute to her service to science at the Thomas Cawthron Memorial Lecture in 1994 and, following her death at Nelson on 5 September that year, conducted her funeral service at St Barnabas' Church, Nelson.





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