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1936

Story: Curtis, Kathleen Maisey

— fellow of Royal Society 1936

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(Rhodes, L., 1998)

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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



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