

**LESLIE HILL
1908-2003**

In January this year Leslie Hill passed away. A man who has contributed enormously to the preservation of our floral heritage, *Veld & Flora* was flooded with tributes to him (see In Memoriam in the June issue, p 44). Two more capture some of the essence of who Leslie was.

VISITS WITH LESLIE

One winter afternoon in 1996 I was invited to visit Leslie Hill, then in his mid-eighties. We met in his study, warmly lit by a single long window. The shelves and tables were pregnant with books, most having the look of repeated use, though there were plenty of new ones as well. One of mine was on a table and Leslie made that his immediate focus, partly to deflect attention away from himself, partly because he took great pleasure in discussions of plants. Leslie offered me a cider. I had never tried this mode of apple-drinking, but accepted a glass and found that it improved our mutual comprehension. (Leslie was slightly deaf, and my American accent was a further impediment.) We discussed painting, food, animals, travel and plants, especially mesembs. Leslie was fondest of the fat-leaved genera, *Lithops*, *Pleiospilos*, *Gibbaeum* and *Conophytum*.

He told me the story of *Lithops viridis*, which he and Hilmar Luckhoff had collected almost half a century earlier. The day was vivid in his mind: how a Calvinian farmer's chance discovery led to the exploration of a peculiar niche where the plants retreated deep into shale sockets. Luckhoff and Hill were thrilled by this new species, the plainest but also, proportionately, the most extensile of lithops. Leslie wondered why it grew only near Calvinia, or were there other colonies? Going south, had it turned into *L. comptonii*? If it was as primitive as I claimed (I'd mumbled something grand about phylogenetics), why was it not more widespread? Had I seen it too? Yes, I had, but the habitat sounded exactly like the one he knew.

After this exchange we discussed the uniqueness of species and their niches; this evolved into a long discussion of conservation. What did I think was the most cogent mode of plant protection? Was it, perhaps... land acquisition? As he said this, I

realized that he actually had the means to make such acquisitions possible and was probably already exploring this tremendous gift. Yet he could hardly bear direct reference to his own role. A sly generosity, as superbly hidden as a lithops!

Throughout the conversation Leslie could not have been more attentive, and his eyes danced like those of a man half his age. Gradually we moved out to the porch, where we had asparagus soup. We were surrounded by all sorts of potted succulents, some lithops, a key-defying *Glottiphyllum* from Barrydale, a magnificent group of *Pleiospilos simulans*, a small *Tanquana hilmarii*. Did I agree with the expulsion of this species from *Pleiospilos*? Leslie liked its new placement, *T. hilmarii's* tender little seedlings being so unlike those of the robust *Pleiospilos*.

We examined a moss-ridden cold frame. At a very advanced age he was still raising seedlings, demonstrating both his continued curiosity and his optimism, for during most of his last decade he was a very frail man. Would I like a few little aloes? They were growing a bit slowly, did I perhaps have any idea how to help them? Was the soil not congenial? Meanwhile some black-barred bantams were running free, pastel sweet peas were dispersing their fragrance, and *Aloe krapohliana* was in full spike ('Isn't it amazing what one can grow in Cape Town!').

On another visit we discussed my own position, that of a frequent visitor to South Africa, an emotional half-exile. He was trying delicately to determine if I might be interested in emigration and, even more obliquely, if I could imagine accepting Someone's assistance if I were to do so. Too dense or too shy to take the hint - I am not even sure there was a hint - I could sense an extraordinary generosity, and the habitually self-effacing tact behind it. After Leslie's



Leslie Hill with Piet van Heerde and halfmens, *Pachypodium namaquanum*.

death I learned that he had sponsored an astounding number of bursaries. I wonder how many of the recipients had any idea where their backing came from?

We never quite discussed money. One would hardly have guessed his fiscal resources from a home which, though large and certainly comfortable, was in no way luxurious. (Well, there was an Irma Stern oil hanging unprotected on a wall, and of course the setting itself, Groot Constantia, promised a certain amplitude.) Most people with his income level would have spent a lot of money on paint and polish. Leslie spent it on land preservation and teaching. Leslie also sponsored books and field trips. In the 1950s he accompanied Harry Hall on his trips, along with Bernard Carp and Piet van Heerde (pictured above). Louisa Bolus named three species for him (only one of these, *Astridia hillii*, has survived revisionary decimation), though he was involved with the discovery and collection of many more species than that. Even at a very late stage he made trips to Namaqualand and the Little Karoo to see the large tracts secured for posterity. Leslie Hill will be missed in many ways. The longer he is gone, the more we will miss him. I trust that his contributions will outlast all of us.

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