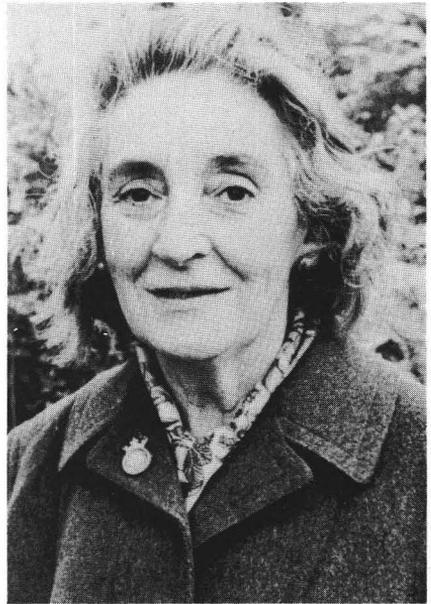


Obituary

DR. EILEEN McCracken 1920-1988

Eileen May McCracken was born in Lisburn, Co. Antrim on 16 February 1920, the only child of Colin and Bessie Webb who came originally from the Forest of Dean. She was educated at the Friends' School, Lisburn and at the Queen's University, Belfast where she took a joint honours B.Sc. in Botany and Geography and became a protégé of the distinguished Professor Estyn Evans. It was under his supervision that she completed a M.Sc. degree, a pioneer study on the history of forestry in Ulster. Later she expanded this to cover the history of forestry and the timber and related trades in the whole country, work which bore fruit in her book *The Irish Woods Since Tudor Times* (1971) and also in major contributions to four other books and some two dozen articles. Her Ph.D. thesis was not on forestry but on the growth of the white population in South Africa.

Her interest in South African history stemmed from a period of residence there in the late 1940s with her husband J. L. McCracken whom she married in 1944. That interest was later to be revived when she moved from forest history to garden history. Her first venture in this field was undertaken in an effort, which proved successful, to save the Turner Palm House in the Belfast Botanic Gardens from demolition. This was followed by work on the history of the gardens at Glasnevin and on botanic and other gardens in Ireland. The outcome of her work in this field was her co-operation with Dr. Charles Nelson to produce *The Brightest Jewel*,



a history of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin (1987). She was provided with a new challenge, the hitherto untouched study of garden history in South Africa, when she returned there in search of better health after her husband's retirement. In this, she was joined by her son Donal and together they produced *The Way to Kirstenbosch*, a history of South African botanic gardens from 1652 (1988), a work which appeared a month after her death. The day before she died she finished an article on William Harvey, an Irish botanist at the Cape.

Although a very gentle person Eileen McCracken felt strongly on a number of subjects and did not hesitate to express herself forcefully. Her love of Ireland was all-pervasive; her dedication to intellectual integrity and

scholarly discipline was complete; she abhorred obsequiousness, discrimination, especially against women, sectarianism and violence in any form; her devotion to animals inspired a passionate interest in wild life and conservation. Outside of her own field of study, she had a very wide knowledge of English poetry. A flair for gracious hospitality, combined with great culinary skills, made her a notable hostess wherever she went.

Eileen McCracken died in Durban on 12 November 1988. Her ashes were taken back to Ireland and scattered in the National Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin where a tree, *Arbutus unedo*, has been planted as a memorial. In the Durban Botanic Gardens also a tree, *Gnetium gnemon*, has been planted to her memory.

Ar dheis lámh Dé go raibh a anam.

Michael McNamara.