

McLennan, Ethel Irene (1891–1983)

by **Sophie C. Ducker**

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Ethel Irene McLennan (1891-1983), botanist and educator, was born on 15 March 1891 at Williamstown, Melbourne, second child of Victorian-born parents of Scottish origin George McLennan, warehouseman, and his wife Eleanor, née Tucker. Educated at Tintern Ladies' College and the University of Melbourne (B.Sc., 1915), Ethel graduated with first-class honours and exhibitions in botany. Appointed a lecturer and demonstrator in the school of botany at Melbourne in 1915, she began preparing her first scientific publications under the supervision of her professor, A. J. Ewart.

Mycology and plant pathology became McLennan's main areas of teaching and her abiding interest. Her early research, focusing on the endophytic fungus associated with the seed of the grass *Lolium*, led to a detailed scholarly study, including her own illustrations, which was awarded a D.Sc. (1921). A second publication in this area won the David Syme Research prize (1927). Appointed a senior lecturer in 1923, two years later she received from the American Association of University Women a Scandinavian fellowship, which provided free passage to England and enabled her to work at Rothamsted Experimental Station, Harpenden. With Professor W. B. Brierley she experimented on the growth of fungi in soil, a subject which also occupied her for many years. Before taking up her duties she travelled in Europe with Isabel Cookson, purchasing in Bonn a Zeiss hand lens, which became her constant aid in field-work and a cherished memento of her only journey abroad.

'Dr. Mac', as she was known, became a formidable strength in the school. In 1929 botany moved to a new building which she helped to plan and furnish. Her influence was evident in Ewart's many publications, including his use of her illustrations. An associate professor from 1931, she steadily attracted postgraduate students and was recognised throughout Australia as a leading plant pathologist and mycologist. She was widely consulted regarding diseases affecting primary industry, including peas and hops in Tasmania and bananas in Queensland. Travelling extensively and undertaking thorough laboratory investigations, she was frequently able to identify pathogens and make recommendations for their treatment.

Following Ewart's death in 1937 McLennan served as acting head of school and was widely supported as a potential successor to the chair. While disappointed at the appointment in 1938 of Dr J. S. Turner, a young plant physiologist from Cambridge, she welcomed the new professor and gave him loyal professional and personal support. During World War II, when botany staff were involved in solving problems of 'bioteriation' in optical instruments, particularly those used in

tropical war zones, she helped to devise a new fungicide treatment that was adopted by the Australian armed forces. Her other major task was the establishment, maintenance and enlargement of *Penicillium* and other fungal cultures with a view to establishing an Australian source of antibiotics.

Active in organisations including the Australian Pan-Pacific Women's Committee (chair, 1929) and the Australian Federation of University Women (president, 1934), McLennan was an inspiration and support to women students. She was welcoming to visitors and newcomers, either at the Lyceum Club (which she joined in 1920) or in her Hawthorn home. A keen, skilful gardener, she served for fifteen years on the National Trust's garden committee at the historic house Como, at South Yarra. Championing the use of indigenous flora in design, she conceived for the botany school a Ewart memorial window—created by Napier Waller — which depicted Victorian ground orchids. In addition to illustrating her own publications, she used the work of other artists, including Ellis Rowan.

Fair skinned with brilliant blue eyes, already white haired in her late thirties, McLennan was a small plump figure, always smartly dressed. Even on field-trips she managed to look immaculate. Quick witted, and sharp tongued when her hackles were raised, she was a discerning judge of people and their achievements. She read widely and her command of botanical literature was sometimes astonishing. She developed a departmental library which became one of the best in the southern hemisphere. Taking her responsibility to education seriously, she never arrived late for her well-prepared lectures and practical classes, and expected the same dedication from colleagues and students. She retired in 1955, then became part-time keeper of the university herbarium (1956-72).

In 1982 Ethel McLennan was awarded an honorary LL.D by the University of Melbourne. On 12 June 1983 she died at Kew, and was cremated. The Melbourne botany department's field station at Wilsons Promontory was named in her honour.

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Related Entries in NCB Sites

- Cookson, Isabel Clifton (friend) 
- Turner, John Stewart (work colleague) 
- Galbraith, Jean (colleague) 
- Ewart, Alfred James (teacher) 
- Weste, Gretna Margaret (pupil) 
- Rowan, Marian Ellis (artist) 

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