

# TREES IN THEIR GENES



The surname Coates Palgrave is synonymous with trees, and the family's epic reference book *Trees of Southern Africa* has been an invaluable tool for dendrologists since 1977. Writer and photographer **Scott Ramsay** visited Meg Coates Palgrave at her home in Harare, Zimbabwe, where they chatted about her in-laws and their books, and her own unflagging passion for the subcontinent's trees.



SCOTT RAMSAY

**Scott Ramsay:** How did you become so fascinated with trees?

**Meg Coates Palgrave:** My parents encouraged a love of nature, so I think I have always had an interest in plants. On my eighth birthday they gave me a packet of flower seeds and when I was a teenager they bought me the book *Rhodesian Wild Flowers* for two guineas (worth about R580/US\$69 today), which at that time was a lot of money for them to spend on a Christmas present for one child. It was special because the author, Margaret Phear (later Tredgold), subsequently signed it for me. Oh, and my maternal grandfather was a gamekeeper on an estate in Scotland – there must be something in the genes!

**SR:** Your late husband Paul Coates Palgrave and his family must have inspired an even deeper appreciation of trees. His mother Olive was the driving force behind the production of *Trees of Central Africa*, published in 1956. (The publication is now out of print.) Do you know how the book came about?

**MCP:** Yes, Paul's mother was at school at Huguenot College in Wellington in the Cape in South Africa until 1906, when she returned to her home in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). She was very artistic, so she painted pictures of the local plants. Her family made expeditions into the bush to collect specimens for her to paint, which she did in minute detail. When she had completed about 100 trees, it was decided that she should try to get them published. This was no easy matter, so The National Publications Trust was formed for this purpose. At that stage, Southern Rhodesia had been united with Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) to form a British federation, so the number of paintings was increased to 110. *Trees of Central Africa* included specimens from all three territories.

**SR:** So the publishing of *Trees of Central Africa* was truly a family affair?

**MCP:** It was indeed. Olive had three sons: Deric, Keith and Paul. Deric and

Paul helped their mother with the photographs; Keith had a BSc in botany and zoology, and a post-graduate certificate in education, so he wrote all the descriptions.

As for my role, I met Paul in 1955 while I was working as a medical laboratory technologist in Harare. Because the book was published the following year, I really only helped with the index, but I did have the pleasure of going out with the family photographing the last few tree species.

**SR:** Several years later the Coates Palgrave family started thinking about compiling a book on the trees of southern Africa. The end result is now the most comprehensive and one of the longest-selling books on the subject. But at one stage it seemed as if it would never get published?

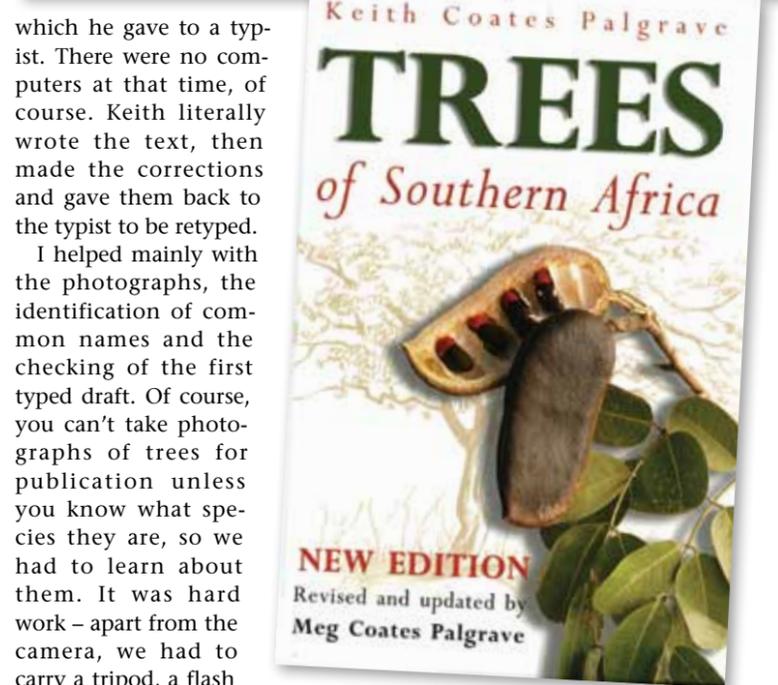
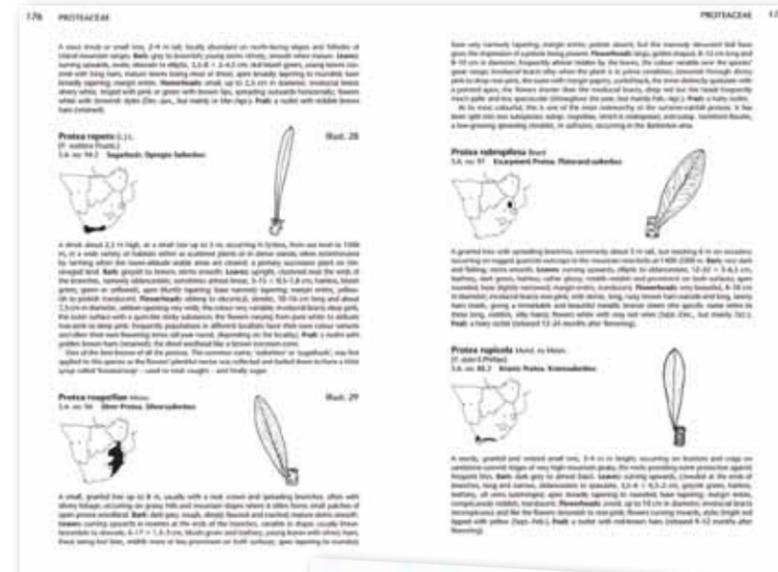
**MCP:** Yes, in 1969 Keith was approached by a small publishing house to do a book on trees in southern Africa, but we never heard another word from them. However, at that stage the publisher Longman was producing books about wildlife and natural history, so Keith went to the company with the concept and a deal was made.

We did everything Longman suggested, the manuscript had been typed and we were about to go on a well-deserved holiday when we were informed that the company no longer wanted to publish the book. That was devastating news, because we had spent five years preparing it.

Fortunately we were going to Cape Town and had heard about the young Struik brothers who were rejuvenating their family publishing company. We had a couple of meetings and an agreement was reached. I still remember Pieter Struik telling us how many times the letter 'n' appeared in the book. In those days that figure determined the number of pages a book would contain. I have forgotten how many there were, but the number was huge!

**SR:** Were there any challenges during the production?

**MCP:** Keith was an inspector of schools and he did all the writing in his spare time. At weekends and during school holidays he spent his time in the Southern Rhodesia Government Herbarium making notes on cards,



which he gave to a typist. There were no computers at that time, of course. Keith literally wrote the text, then made the corrections and gave them back to the typist to be retyped.

I helped mainly with the photographs, the identification of common names and the checking of the first typed draft. Of course, you can't take photographs of trees for publication unless you know what species they are, so we had to learn about them. It was hard work – apart from the camera, we had to carry a tripod, a flash and lots of film.

Struik Publishers then wanted detailed line drawings of the leaves of each tree. Despite having none at the time, we said, 'Yes! Of course we can do those!' It was very time-consuming work, and both Paul and I had other, full-time jobs. So our children Shirley and Tony spent the school holidays sketching. As far as the kids are concerned, tree books ruined their young lives, so they don't want anything to do with trees ever again!

In any event, the line drawings weren't good enough to publish; we ▶



SCOTT RAMSAY

**The Australians have 900 acacia species** and it would have been too much work to change their names

## KNOW YOUR TREES

Learn how to identify indigenous trees in the field on one of Meg Coates Palgrave's 'Know Your Trees' courses. She provides each student with a key to the trees of the area they're interested in, so they can focus on local species rather than those occurring throughout the subcontinent. The keys are easy to use and the subject matter is approached as a recreational pastime. 'People attend the course for pleasure; anything they learn is a bonus,' she says. Botanical knowledge is not necessary. To qualify, you need eight to 10 people and a venue of your choice. The two-day course costs R1 000 per person.

To book or find out more about the trees in your area, e-mail [megcp@zol.co.zw](mailto:megcp@zol.co.zw)

were very lucky to get the illustrator Margo Branch to redraw them all. The launch of *Trees of Southern Africa* was just wonderful. It was the most comprehensive book at the time, and still is today. It has been in print since its debut.

**SR:** And how did you become its editor?

**MCP:** Well, Keith became very ill but was involved almost until his death. Struik approached other tree experts, unsuccessfully, so I said, 'Why don't I do it?' In 1996 I undertook the job of revising the book.

Keith owned the copyright to the first and second editions and although I own the copyright to the third edition, his name is still on it. Most of the photographs have been retained, but I wrote all the text and included about 400 additional drawings. I want to do another revision and place the trees into family alphabetical order, but at the moment there is such a 'hoo-haa' about name changes that I need to wait a bit.

**SR:** I believe there was some drama involved with Olive Coates Palgrave's original paintings?

**MCP:** We thought we had lost them! Each brother thought one of the others had them, so when Keith was working on a book called *Common Trees of the Highveld* and wanted to use some of the paintings, no-one knew where they were. Then, in

1980, someone found them while clearing out the vaults of the prime minister's office. Keith was telephoned and within half an hour he was there to pick them up. It appears that when *Trees of Central Africa* was launched, the prime minister couldn't attend the function so the original paintings were sent to him. Once he had taken a look, they were put away safely. After Keith died in 1991, I arranged for them to be sent to Kew Gardens, where they have been restored and are safely kept. (They can be viewed online at JSTOR Plant Science, [www.plants.jstor.org/](http://www.plants.jstor.org/))

**SR:** How many species of tree are there?

**MCP:** Ha! Don't ask me! After all, what is a tree? I like botanist Elsie Esterhuizen's description: 'If you can sit in its shade, then it must be a tree.' Our book contains about 1600 species.

**SR:** On the subject of the Aussies appropriating the name *Acacia*...

**MCP:** It is ridiculous. The type specimen for acacia is *Acacia nilotica*. That species has thorns on it, and acacia means 'with thorns'. Most of the Australian species have no thorns. The Australians used all the wrong reasoning; they have 900 acacia species and it would have been too much work to change their names.

**SR:** Do you have a favourite tree?

**MCP:** No. I love all trees and it adds to my enjoyment to know their names. Trees are like people: they are all different.

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