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Board of the
Botanic Gardens and
State Herbarium



HANSJOERG EICHLER*

1 April 1916 — 22 June 1992

Born on 1 April 1916 in Ravensburg in south west Germany, Hansjoerg Eichler grew up amongst forests, rural fields, meadows and streams: so began his life-long interest in hydrophytes. His boyhood ambition to become a botanist was kindled early by an enthusiastic school teacher who stimulated his curiosity in the local flora.

After his family moved to Berlin Professor Ludwig Diels became Eichler's inspiration and mentor allowing the young student working space in the Botanische Museum Berlin-Dahlem, and encouraging him to pursue a scientific career.

The war in Europe (1939 - 1945) profoundly affected him and the scars remained throughout his life. Military training and later war service with the German Air Force (signal corps) interrupted his studies. But more personally devastating were the effects of the March 1943 bombing raids on Berlin which destroyed his home, his growing personal herbarium and botanical library and also burnt down the Botanische Museum.

As one of a group of promising young German scientists in February 1944 Eichler was exempted from war service to study and work at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut. Situated at first on the outskirts of Vienna, war activities forced the Institut to relocate to central Germany near the Harz Mountains. It was thus that Eichler found himself post-war in 1953 in Gatersleben, East Germany under Russian authority when the East German Academy of Science re-established the research institution.

He gained his *Dr. rer. nat.* at the University of Halle-Wittenberg with his dissertation "Floristische und phytozoologische Untersuchung des Hakels und seiner nächsten Umgebung" in 1950.

Despite numerous upheavals and traumas during his years at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut his experience gained in assisting with building-up the herbarium, collaborating with taxonomic revisions and experimenting with living plants gave him an excellent grounding in his chosen profession. A post-doctoral scholarship from the West German Forschungs-Gemeinschaft enabled him to enjoy eighteen months of uninterrupted research based at the Rijksherbarium, Leiden — a period of his life which he found professionally most rewarding. While there he worked on a revision of Ranunculaceae for the Flora Malesiana. A fortuitous brief working visit to check bibliographic notes at Kew Herbarium brought him in contact with British colleagues who told him of a post advertised in Australia.

Before long he was on his way to take up his appointment as the first Keeper of the State Herbarium at the Adelaide Botanic Garden, South Australia. He held this position until 1973. Hansjoerg Eichler and his wife Marlies arrive by ship in Adelaide on 6 November 1955 with high hopes and ready for new challenges; he began work on 8 November.

The Adelaide Botanic Garden sixth Director T.R.N. (Noel) Lothian had, from the time of his appointment in 1947, battled government departments' apathy and red tape to achieve the re-

* Eichler's extensive botanical library has been donated to the National Herbarium (formerly Herbarium Australiense), Canberra.

A complete bibliography of his publications will be published in *Taxon* (West & Hewson, in press). His herbarium collections, last number 24236, are deposited mainly in the State Herbarium, Adelaide (AD) and the National Herbarium, Canberra (CANB).

establishment of a herbarium at the Garden. This would be a State Herbarium to bring together many of the scattered collections held both privately and in institutions around the State.

It was unfortunate that from the outset strong personality and character clashes prevented Eichler and Lothian working amicably together towards what was, in fact, a common goal — a world class herbarium. E. Stirling (Ted) Booth, who had been Acting Herbarium Keeper for some months previously, warmly welcomed the Eichlers and they remained life-long friends. He was an admirable cultural bridge both in the social and scientific spheres while Eichler became acquainted with his adopted country and settled into his new job.

At the time of his arrival the infant herbarium occupied two rooms (without doors) in the Botanic Garden administrative building. Equipment was minimal and funds scarce. The nucleus of the herbarium — the Richard Schomburgk collection and the University of Adelaide material on permanent loan, principally the Ralph Tate and John McConnell Black collections, all in dire need of curation — had already been delivered. There was no space for any of the other promised material.

Eichler was a rigorous professional well-grounded in classical taxonomy and traditional herbarium procedures. He could see clearly what needed doing and how it should be done. A short paper entitled "The collection of plants and its importance for systematic botany" was prepared (Booth & Eichler, 1956) within weeks of his arrival to stimulate interested people to collect plants scientifically.

The amount of technical work (sorting, labelling, mounting, rearranging) to be done before the existing collections could be made available for use in scientific research was overwhelming. Very early he set up a model of how he believed a family should be curated using Pittosporaceae as an example. He longed to get on with his own research "to revise the genus *Clematis* in Australasia ... to investigate the relations between the Australasian *Ranunculus* species and those of New Guinea ... and to revise the phanerogamic hydrophytes" (Herbarium Annual Report 1955/56).

Equipment was gradually purchased as funding became available — labels, folders, boxes, presses, straps, a microscope, a microtome, a drying cupboard — and power points and a telephone were installed. Gradually more staff were employed. Eichler's frustrations were obvious in his reports as he worked steadily, methodically towards achieving his goal — a herbarium of international standards known and respected in international scientific circles.

"... it should not be forgotten the cultural level of a State is judged by the level of its cultural institutions; one of them is a herbarium" (Herbarium Report June 1957).

There was pride within the Botanic Gardens Board in achieving a herbarium but for most members no appreciation of the tremendous task involved in curation. Insistence that the Herbarium be open to the public and that an identification service be given highest priority depressed and exasperated, but did not discourage Eichler. He refused to compromise his procedural standards and maintained that taxonomic research should come before a local public image. He was appalled at the rapid destruction of indigenous vegetation in Australia, and South Australia in particular, as land was put "under the plough". He was a staunch advocate of conserving natural bushland in large reserves.

There was always a sense of urgency — collecting good topotypes before all native vegetation disappeared from the State's agricultural regions. Field trips were carefully planned to visit type localities of taxa described by earlier botanists, particularly Black, Tate and Robert Brown. He stressed the importance of adequate duplicates when collecting to foster exchange between other herbaria both interstate and overseas.



Hansjoerg Eichler (December 1967)

Photo: W.M. Hodge

Eichler had the ability to inspire amateurs — field naturalists and others — to collect for him, a trait reminiscent of Ferdinand Mueller a century earlier. As with his staff he expected, and demanded high standards, and many later told with amusement of their enforced apprenticeships before being accepted as legitimate collectors.

From the beginning University of Adelaide undergraduate botany students were willing volunteers during vacation times mounting and labelling specimens at the Herbarium. Some were stimulated to continue to higher degrees doing taxonomic revisions under Eichler's supervision and enthusiastically acknowledged the benefits they gained from his tenacious insistence on high standards. The University of Adelaide bestowed on him an honorary Ph.D (1959) and an honorary lectureship in Botany (1965-1975).

He brought to Australia his small botanical library which he made available to all staff and visitors at the Herbarium. He worked hard to build up taxonomic literature in the Botanic Garden library, including journals not available elsewhere in South Australia. He promoted the idea of buying microfiche editions of rare botanical works.

Eichler felt keenly his isolation from other taxonomists. He welcomed opportunities such as annual ANZAAS meetings to join interstate colleagues in discussions. During his fifteen month secondment to Kew (1961-62) as Australian Botanical Liaison Officer he enjoyed his respite from administrative duties. He examined taxonomic problems involving European plants naturalised in Australia, studied types of Australian species housed in European herbaria and consulted directly with colleagues. Four papers published in *Taxon* in 1963 resulted. In addition a task begun immediately on his arrival in Adelaide was considerably advanced viz. the nomenclatural revision of Black's Flora of South Australia. This was finally published in June 1965 as a massive 385 page "Supplement to J.M. Black's Flora of South Australia (2nd edn 1943-57)".

The Herbarium had expanded rapidly over the years to fill far more than the two rooms Eichler had found on his arrival in Adelaide. Work began in 1964 on a much needed two storied building designed specifically as a modern herbarium. Internally many features bore testimony to his rigorous attention to detail. This new State Herbarium, occupied in October 1965 by Eichler and his staff, was recognised at that time as the best-equipped in Australia possessing amongst other things the best in modern storage, a motorised compactus system.

In 1973 Eichler left Adelaide to take up his appointment as Curator at Herbarium Australiense, CSIRO Division of Plant Industry, Canberra, ACT. He left behind a growing Herbarium of international standing with an able research staff and technicians well-grounded in sound curatorial practices and techniques.

His period (1973-81) at Herbarium Australiense was very different from that in Adelaide. He took over a well-developed herbarium which was about to move into its new building. His role was mainly administrative. He was able to entice overseas taxonomists to join his staff. He negotiated the return to Australia of duplicates of many Robert Brown collections from the 1802-05 "Investigator" voyage — material of inestimable value to Australian taxonomists. Another significant achievement was the launching of *Brunonia*, a taxonomic journal of international standing to replace the earlier *Contributions from Herbarium Australiense*.

From the time of the Adelaide ANZAAS meeting in August 1958 when Professor J.G. (Joe) Wood got the proposal to produce a Flora of Australia off the ground, Eichler was an enthusiastic supporter. He saw this as an enormous step forward which would be a huge stimulus to taxonomic research in Australia. He certainly had an influence in shaping the project and, as always, championed high scholarly standards. He served on all the various Flora

committees from the first New Flora of Australia Committee (1958-59) through to the first Editorial Committee (1981-82).

Following his retirement from Herbarium Australiense Eichler concentrated on his own research — the revisions of Zygophyllaceae, Umbelliferae and Ranunculaceae for the Flora of Australia. He completed the manuscript for Ranunculaceae early in 1992 and the other treatments were well advanced.

In recognition of his substantial contribution to professional taxonomy and to our knowledge of the Australian flora eight species, by various authors have all been named in his honour.

Eichler was a professional nomenclaturist, through and through: for him applying the International Code was automatic and became almost an obsession. He was an active member of the International Commission on Botanical Nomenclature of the International Union of Biological Sciences (Committee for Spermatophyta) from 1968 until 1992. At the time of his death he was preparing a proposal to take to the XV International Botanical Congress in Tokyo in 1993.

He died of a heart attack in Germany where he and Marlies were visiting relatives and furthering his research. It seems appropriate that his last days were spent at Berlin-Dahlem Herbarium, which he had held in deep affection since his first youthful contact in 1936. It was with pride that he had, in 1979, accepted the Willdenow Medal, a recognition of his personal contribution to that herbarium presented on the occasion of the 300th anniversary celebrations of the Botanic Garden, Berlin.

From the time of their marriage in 1953 Hansjoerg was actively supported and strongly encouraged in all his endeavours by his wife Marie-Luise (Marlies), née Möhring, who survives him. Indeed, without children, they both devoted their lives to promoting taxonomic botany in Australia.

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Enid L. Robertson
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