

WAITE ARBORETUM FACT SHEET: P. M. ROUNTREE 1911 – 1994

(Arboretum seats, memorial seats, history features)

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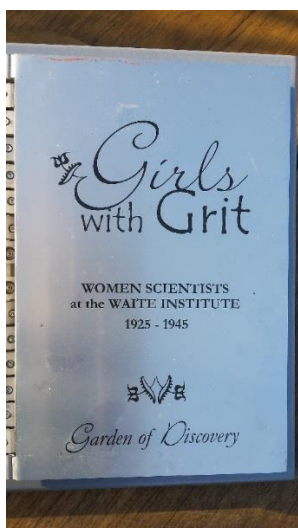
PHYLLIS MARGARET ROUNTREE 1911 - 1994



Left - source: Denise Schumann, 2001, *Girls of Grit metal book*. **Right** – source: Jooste and Sherratt, 2004

1. NAME - DOB – DOD: Phyllis Margaret ROUNTREE 1911 Hamilton Victoria – 27 July 1994

- **Occupation:** Bacteriologist
- **Seat and table location / history feature location:** in the - *Garden of Discovery, Girls with Grit WOMEN SCIENTIST at the WAITE INSTITUE 1925 – 1945 Garden of Discovery metal book.*
- **Nearby tree / plant species:** a collection of grasses, flowers and ground cover species.



Photos: Terry Langham

2. QUALIFICATIONS:

1930 Education - Bachelor of Science (BSc) completed at the University of Melbourne

1931 Education - Master of Science (MSc) completed at the University of Melbourne

1950 Education - Doctor of Science (DSc) received from the University of Melbourne (Walker, 1997 and 2004).

3. AREA OF RESEARCH at the Waite - Soil Bacteriologist:

In 1931, Phyllis Rountree was offered a three-year research fellowship at the Waite Institute to work with the internationally acclaimed soil scientist, Professor James Prescott. Prior to Prescott's appointment there had been no systematic classification or scientific analysis of the composition of Australian soils. Her skills as a soil bacteriologist were crucial to this work.

Phyllis Rountree carried out pioneering research into salinity and soil leaching problems in the irrigation blocks along the River Murray. Her radical work on reducing salinity through the application of sulphur, to change the bacterial structure of the soil, lies largely forgotten in the nation's archives. She carried out the first bacteriological analysis of sub-antarctic soils brought back by Sir Douglas Mawson from the B.A.N.Z. Antarctic Expedition 1929 - 1931. Rountree also made a significant contribution to South Australia's embryonic wine industry by working with winemakers on phage development.

In 1934, at the end of her fellowship, Phyllis Rountree was not offered further research work or a permanent appointment, so she left the Waite Institute and returned to Melbourne. Agriculture's loss was Medical Science's gain.

During the 1950s, Phyllis Rountree was acclaimed and honoured internationally for her discovery of *Staphylococcus aureus*, commonly known as golden staph. In a twist of fate, Rountree's pioneering work on golden staph allowed her a second chance to prove she was one of Australia's finest microbiologists. After a long and distinguished career in science Phyllis Rountree died in 1994 aged 83 years.

Source: Denise Schumann, 2001, Girls of Grit WOMEN SCIENTISTS of the WAITE INSTITUTE metal book

INSECURE BUT ENJOYING WORK AT THE WAITE

'Well now, it was very nice having you here dear, but we don't employ women permanently'.⁽¹⁾
(Jooste and Sherratt, 2004)

"This is how Phyllis Rountree recalled the attitude of her first boss, Professor James A. Prescott, to the end of Rountree's three-year CSIR fellowship in 1934 at the Waite Agricultural Institute in Adelaide. It was a time of shortage of scientific workers in Australia, not addressed until tertiary education was expanded under the Menzies Government well into the 1960s. However, in an environment where her all-male scientific colleagues did not even deign to chat with the young

Phyllis at afternoon tea, employment opportunities for the outstanding graduate from Melbourne University were not straightforward.

Rountree recounted that her work at the Institute had proceeded 'in a rather leisurely sort of way' and she 'thoroughly enjoyed' herself. Concluding her fellowship, Rountree presented a paper that embodied three years of research into the problem of soil salination to the fastidious Professor Prescott, and he accepted it without so much as an addition. Nonetheless, the Institute did not offer Rountree a continuing position, and later she reflected that 'if I'd been a man, they probably would have found me something'. ⁽²⁾—(Jooste and Sherratt, 2004)

POST WAITE CAREER:

"Upon completed her Masters degree, Rountree expected to work in the agricultural field, but her career at the Waite Institute went no further than a pristine but forgotten paper. She returned to Melbourne and walked off the street into the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI). Rountree politely asked the Director, distinguished physiologist Sir Charles Kellaway, for a job. Dr Frank Burnet, later Sir Frank MacFarlane Burnet the nobel laureate, interviewed Rountree for the job, 'I don't know who was the more shy ... Dr Burnet or I', said Rountree. She was appointed as a research assistant.

At the WEHI, Rountree was introduced to research on staphylococci, later her area of specialisation. She witnessed discoveries such as Burnet's research on the nature of bacteriophages, viruses which attach themselves to certain types of bacteria, rendering the bacteria identifiable. 'I was thrown into something that was really happening' said Rountree, reflecting upon her time at WEHI. 'Once one had worked there, one had, I think, a passport to go almost anywhere.' It was on Burnet's reference that Rountree was accepted into the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1936-37 to study a graduate course in clinical bacteriology.

At the time the London School's course was the most prestigious post-graduate course offered on bacteriology techniques and principles. Rountree studied under the 'terrifying' Professor Wentworth W. C. Topley and the endearing Sir Graham S. Wilson, ⁽⁹⁾ and with the London School's annual intake of 11 other British and colonial students" (Jooste and Sherratt, 2004).

4. RESEARCH SPECIALITY post Waite career:

*"At the WEHI, Rountree was introduced to **research on staphylococci**, later her area of specialisation" (Jooste and Sherratt, 2004).*

*During the 1950s, Phyllis Rountree was acclaimed and honoured internationally for her discovery of *Staphylococcus aureus*, commonly known as golden staph. In a twist of fate, Rountree's pioneering work on golden staph allowed her a second chance to prove she was one of Australia's finest microbiologists. After a long and distinguished career in science Phyllis Rountree died in 1994 aged 83 years.*

Source: Denise Schumann, 2001, *Girls of Grit* Girls of Grit WOMEN SCIENTISTS of the WAITE INSTITUTE metal book

5. FURTHER INFORMATION - SOME WORDS OF HUMOUR, INTERESTING FACTS, ETC:

"1931 – 1934 Career position - CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) fellowship at the Waite Agricultural Research Institute

1934 – 1935 Career position - Walter and Eliza Hall Institute

1936 – 1937 Career position - Worked at the Public Health Laboratory in London, while studying for a post-graduate Diploma in Bacteriology at the School of Hygiene in London

1938 – 1943 Career position - Clinical Bacteriologist in the Bacteriology Laboratory at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne

1943 – 1944 Career position - Brief war service as a food control tester for the Australian Defence Forces

1944 – 1961 Career position - Research Bacteriologist at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney

1950 Education - Doctor of Science (DSc) received from the University of Melbourne

1961 – 1971 Career position - Chief Bacteriologist the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney

1967 Career position - Chairman of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Society for Microbiology

1971 – 1992 Career position - Consultant Bacteriologist at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney

1971 – 1992 Career position - Honorary Research Associate in Medical Microbiology at University of New South Wales" (Walker, 1997 and 2004).

6. PERSONAL INFORMATION:

"Rountree was very much a career woman. She considered never marrying and having children as a 'necessary sacrifice'. 'I had several narrow escapes from getting married in the 1930s,' she noted, 'but I knew that if I did marry it would mean the end of my career. That's how it was in those days - if you married you had to leave your job.' ⁽²³⁾" (Jooste and Sherratt, 2004).

7. PHOTOS:

8. REFERENCES:

Jooste, L. and Sherratt, T. (listed by Lisa Jooste, and Tim Sherratt), 2004, updated 13 Nov 2007, *Phyllis Margaret Rountree Guide to Records*, Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre on AustehcWeb, April 2004, [Online, accessed 1 April 2016] URL: <http://www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/roun/histnote.htm>

Schumann, D. 2001, *Garden of Discovery, Girls with Grit WOMEN SCIENTISTS at the WAITE INSTITUTE 1925 – 1945 Garden of Discovery* (metal book), Schumann & Associates, Historian & Cultural Heritage Consultant, Adelaide

Walker, R. (1997 and 2004) *Encyclopaedia of Australian Science 2015: Biographical Entry Rountree, Phyllis Margaret (1912 – 1994)*, [Online, accessed 26 April 2016]. URL:<http://www.eoas.info/biogs/P002535b.htm>

