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BOOK REVIEW

Kirstenbosch*, the headquarters of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa, must have one of the most spectacular sites of any Botanic Garden in the world — set on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain with Castle Rock rising in the background. This book, written by the present director, briefly tells the story of the garden and illustrates with photographs some of its plants.

The garden is relatively young and since becoming the National Botanic Garden in 1913, has had only three directors, Professor H. H. W. Pearson, Professor Harold Compton and Professor Brian Rycroft, all famous names in South African botany. In the book, the history of the land which began as a farm in 1672 is described, and the development of the site is traced up to the present century. It is stressed that Kirstenbosch is not the only National Botanic Garden in South Africa; there are some eight subsidiary gardens in other parts of the country, allowing plants with different climatic and ecological requirements to be grown. The work of the Herbarium is mentioned, where studies on the flora of the SW Cape are carried out. Kirstenbosch also has an educational function and school children from all over the Cape Peninsula visit the garden to attend classes in botany and nature study. Only native South African plants are grown, but with the enormously rich flora of that country there is plenty of choice and there is no need to include species from other parts of the world.

Two important projects (among others) have been undertaken by staff at Kirstenbosch. One was research on the development of Proteas as a commercial crop, now a major source of income. The other was the battle against the plant invaders — plants imported from other countries, such as *Hakea* spp., *Acacia* spp. and *Pinus pinaster*. The diseases and insect pests which control them in their home countries are absent in South Africa, and with alarming rapidity they began to take over huge areas of the native vegetation. Botanists at Kirstenbosch did valuable work in helping to curb the spread of the alien plants.

Another battle fought by Kirstenbosch was the battle against Cape Town city council who in 1971 put forward a plan to build a six-lane highway through the garden. This road would have completely destroyed the amenity and atmosphere of the garden, and the response from local residents and nature-lovers as well as from botanists and horticulturists throughout the world that the road must not be built was unanimous. The fight was led by Professor Rycroft and after three years the proposal to build the road was defeated. If any future attempt should be made to resurrect the road scheme (and this could happen) it is to be hoped that it will be as successfully suppressed. Not only is Kirstenbosch a major tourist attraction but it is an important haven for endangered species.

The section of text at the beginning of the book is printed on pale yellowish brown paper which makes a pleasing change. Less pleasing is the irritatingly off-centre position of the text on the pages. Probably the main reason for buying the book however, is the photographs, all of which are in colour and, on the whole, successful and attractive, although there is an occasional example of bad printing. Photograph 3 is unfortunate — a montage of *Disa uniflora* against a background of Castle Rock which looks very artificial; possibly this is the intention but the effect is unattractive. The famous Cape Heaths and Proteas are given the space they deserve and selected species from the South African flora are illustrated (photograph 119 is certainly not an *Impatiens*, but is a species of *Exacum*). In addition to the plants, there are photographs of the staff working in the herbarium and garden, as well as some of the buildings, features, and general garden views.

It is to be hoped that this book will make Kirstenbosch even more widely known than it is already. It will serve as a competent introduction for new visitors, and will bring back happy memories to those who know the garden well.

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**Kirstenbosch* by Brian Rycroft, with photographs by Ray Ryan. Published by Howard Timmins Publishers, Cape Town. 1980. No price given.