This is the sixth in a series of articles about historical women botanists and botanical illustrators. The previous five can be found in the Winter 2019–23 issues of “The Bulletin” (collected online at arboretumfoundation.org/news/bulletin-archive/women-botanists-botanical-artists). This article focuses on illustrators who worked in Britain, often in obscurity.

Matilda Smith
Matilda Smith (1854–1926) did not have art training as a child, but she developed a keen interest in plants. It was helpful for this pursuit to be part of a botanically oriented family, including her cousin, Joseph Hooker, who was the second director of Kew Gardens.

Smith became good friends with Hooker, who was a skilled illustrator, and he both tutored and encouraged her in learning this art form. He recommended she submit drawings to “Curtis’s Botanical Magazine,” a long-running periodical—started in 1787 and still published today—that profiles new plant discoveries for both botanists and gardeners. His encouragement was well-placed because over the next 42 years, Smith contributed 2300 drawings to this celebrated publication.

Hooker was also the editor of “Icones Plantarum,” an extensive, 40-volume publication depicting plants drawn from herbarium specimens held by Kew. Smith was skilled at recreating the appearance of living plants—despite the limitations of a dried, flattened subject—and she contributed 1500 images to the publication. Although “Icones Plantarum” was completed more than 100 years ago, botanical researchers still consult the facsimile copy at the Miller Library on a regular basis.

Smith’s work included some of the first images in European science of the flora of New Zealand. Late in her career, she was the illustrator for “Illustrations of the New Zealand Flora” by Thomas Frederick Cheeseman, published in 1914. In his preface, the author writes, “Altogether, nearly five thousand of her drawings have actually appeared in various well-known publications. I think that all capable judges will agree with me in saying that the plates contained in these volumes will enhance her already well-earned reputation.”

Todea superba, by Matilda Smith, from “Illustrations of the New Zealand Flora.”
Lilian Snelling

“Lilian Snelling (1879–1972) was probably the most important British botanical artist of the first half of the 20th century.” This bold statement was made by Brent Elliott, the long-standing head librarian and historian for the Royal Horticultural Society, in an article for that society’s journal, “The Garden,” in July 2003.

This is especially surprising as very little is known about Snelling before the age of 36, when she became the protégé of Henry John Elwes and began using her skills to draw plants from the extensive garden of this well-known English botanist and dendrologist. At his recommendation, she spent five years at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, honing her skills. Her precise work from that time is the basis for the 2020 book “Lilian Snelling: the Rhododendron and Primula Drawings,” by Henry J. Noltie.

Snelling’s illustrations may also be found in the monograph on the genus Lilium by Elwes. Although the Miller Library does not have this particular book, we do have other books on lilies in our collections in which her illustrations have been reproduced. Snelling also produced the exquisite color plates and drawings for “A Study of the Genus Paeonia,” by Frederick Claude Stern (1946).

Snelling was appointed as an artist for “Curtis’s Botanical Magazine” at the time of Matilda Smith’s retirement, and for 30 years was the principal artist. She also was a skilled lithographer, being able to transfer her work—and that of others—to zinc plates for reproduction. Upon her retirement, the November 1952 volume of “Curtis’s” was dedicated to her. The dedication describes how she “with remarkable delicacy of accurate outlines, brilliancy of colour, and intricate gradation of tone has faithfully portrayed most of the plants figured in this magazine from 1922 to 1952.”

Arabella Elizabeth Roupell

Librarians are often called upon to solve mysteries, and we enjoy hearing stories about the triumphs of our colleagues. One of my favorites is the story of Mary Gunn (1899–1989), a librarian at the Botanical Research Institute in Pretoria, South Africa. She had a special interest in the history of botany and botanical illustration.

In the 1930s, she began researching a book in her library’s collection titled “Specimens of the Flora of South Africa by a Lady” and published anonymously in England in 1849. This book included nine plates of colorful, native plants noteworthy for their quality. The identity of the “Lady” was unknown.

Gunn used her research skills over a period of nearly 20 years to discover that the artist was Arabella Elizabeth Roupell (1817–1914), the wife of a British judge who was in Cape Town, South Africa for only two years in the early 1840s. Having much leisure time, Roupell would

RIGHT: Harlequin flowers (Sparaxis), by Arabella Roupell, from “More Cape Flowers by a Lady.”
ride on horseback to collect plants for painting, often accompanied by a British botanist, who later introduced her to William Hooker, the first director of Kew and father of Joseph.

Hooker was very impressed with Roupell’s work, which included about 100 paintings. He promoted the publication of a small selection of them in “Specimens,” but why Roupell was never credited is unknown. The book received high praise at the time, with a copy being given to Queen Victoria. Only 110 were printed, and these soon became rare collector’s items.

Through her exhaustive efforts, Gunn not only discovered this history but also the location of the original paintings. With the help of the South African government, the paintings were sent to the University of Cape Town in the 1950s. “More Cape Flowers by a Lady” was published in 1964 with reproductions of 11 of Roupell’s original works and a text by Allan Bird that included their history. While the Miller Library does not have the earlier book, we are pleased to have this limited, later publication.

Elinor Frances Vallentin

The Falkland Islands, or Islas Malvinas, are an isolated archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean 300 miles east of the Patagonian coast. Although the islands were uninhabited when discovered by European powers in the 1600s, dispute over their control has continued for centuries, including a deadly war between Argentina and Britain as recently as 1982. The flora of the Falklands is quite isolated, too, and it includes no native trees, with the largest shrubs only reaching seven feet tall.

Elinor Frances Vallentin (1873–1924) was born on West Falkland Island, when it was under British control. One of 10 children, she enjoyed horseback riding with her sisters, although they were frustrated by Elinor’s frequent stops to collect or look at plants. After marrying botanist Rupert Vallentin in 1904, she moved to England and studied botanical illustration with Matilda Smith at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Rupert—who had a special interest in marine algae and ferns—and Elinor returned to the Falklands in 1909. During the next two years, Elinor collected more than 900 specimens of flowering plants, fungi and lichens, all of which are now preserved at Kew. She also drew from life many of the islands’ flowering plants and ferns before returning to England. Her efforts were praised in the “Journal of the Linnean Society” in 1914: “...as far as flowering plants and ferns are concerned, the flora of the Falkland Islands may now be said to be thoroughly known.”

Vallentin’s drawings were also exhibited at a general meeting of the same society and received high praise. Her intention was to publish an extensive book, but her health declined. With the help of her husband and Smith, she published a modest book in 1921 titled “Illustrations of the Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Falkland Islands.”

The plant descriptions in the book were written by Enid Mary Cotton (1889–1956), another botanist associated with Kew. Like those of “Curtis’s Botanical Magazine” published at the time, the 64 illustrations in Vallentin’s book were hand-colored lithographs, which was unusual because, for most publications, this technique had been replaced by color printing 50 years earlier.

LEFT: *Rubus geoides*, by Elinor Vallentin.

RIGHT: Geranium family, by H. Isabel Adams.
Harriet Isabel Adams

On my office wall at the Miller Library is a framed poster titled "Mackintosh Flowers" from the Hunterian Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. The four images of wildflowers are typically attributed only to Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928), but they are signed with two sets of initials, the other being MMM for Charles’ wife, Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (1864–1933). Art historians disagree on the significance of the dual signatures and on Margaret’s contribution to the works, but suffice it to say, these botanical illustrations are lovely examples of a style that was prominent at the turn of the 20th century.

They remind me of the work of Harriet Isabel Adams, a less well-known botanical artist of the same period. Adams is so little known that for many years there were widely differing accounts of her birth and death dates, but recent research places those at 1853 and 1937, respectively. It is generally agreed that she studied at the Birmingham School of Art. It is certain that her scientific vigor was recognized when she was accepted as a Fellow in the Linnaean Society of London in 1906, a prestigious group of botanical scientists that require a two-thirds approval of membership to be accepted.

However, praise for her work was not universal. Her style of presentation, developed from the Arts and Crafts movement, was not in the tradition of scientific illustration. She typically included several plants from the same family in each painting, artfully arranged and labeled. Critics agreed her works were beautiful, but some were dismissive of their contribution to scientific knowledge.

Adams is most well-known for “Wild Flowers of the British Isles,” published in two volumes. The Miller Library does not have these, but does have her book on French wildflowers, “Fleurs sauvages de France.” Published in 1910, it presents species common to France and Britain and uses many of the illustrations from her British book, re-labeled with French common names. The text in French was not a translation but instead written anew by Henri Coupin (1811–1866) wrote this in 1849, describing the paintings of Arabella Elizabeth Roupell.

As quoted in "More Cape Flowers by a Lady," he continues to wish for “further glimpses of the Cape Flora, as make us regret our talented Authoress has closed her labours so soon, and left so many striking forms unfigured.”

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Bibliography


