

Dame Ella Campbell – Otago Graduate

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Dame Ella's long and distinguished career began here in Otago. With her mother as role model Ella was inspired to pursue a scientific profession, one that resulted in many accolades. She became the first woman lecturer at Massey University, a renowned botanist specialising in liverworts, an internationally accredited orchid judge, was awarded a D.Sc. and Fellowship of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture and was created Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 1997.

Ella Orr Campbell was born in Dunedin on October 28, 1910 the eldest daughter of Orr Campbell, a building contractor, and Agnes Campbell (nee Kinder), a pharmacy student. After attending a local kindergarten she went to George St School. Then for a brief spell in 1920 while staying with relatives she attended school in South Otago before being enrolled at the Normal School, which at that time was in Union St, Dunedin. By then the family was living in the old Chapman homestead on Leith St, enjoying and improving grounds planted by Sir Frederick Chapman before the turn of the century, where incidentally, a magnolia he planted in 1879 still flowers profusely. This garden, her mother's interest in science, and a botany teacher who was a family friend, were major influences on the young Ella, as were family holidays centred on botanical excursions, ranging as far afield as Cascade Creek near Lake Wakatipu, Stewart Island and the Routeburn Valley.

With a teaching career in mind she began the two-year course at Dunedin Training College in 1929. She was involved with the Hockey Club, being a member of the B1 team, and played for the representative team in Training College Tournaments each year. In 1931 she enrolled for a B.A. at the University of Otago. Ella could have taken languages, as she was multilingual. However, having to study the history of the subject had no appeal. Instead she chose to major in botany where the Department was run by the Rev. John E. Holloway, a world-class researcher and teacher who specialised in primitive New Zealand flora. In the environment he provided Ella excelled, as did many of her contemporaries - Greta Stevenson, John Thorpe Holloway, Betty Molesworth and Betty Batham. He encouraged students to publish so Ella's first publication, based on her M.A. thesis 'The Life History of *Histiopteris incisa*', appeared in 1936.

Holloway had been running the Department single-handedly since its inception in 1924, so when his plight was acknowledged in 1938, Ella became the much-awaited Assistant Lecturer. From then, until she left to be Lecturer in Plant Morphology and Anatomy at Massey in 1945, she was busy with Department and University activities. Her membership of the Federation of University Women culminated in her becoming Otago Branch President at a time when the focus was on refugee status of European colleagues and food supplies to war-torn countries. The Federation was also looking ahead to what improvements could be achieved for a post-war Otago University by suggesting more emphasis on Pacific and European courses. Ella continued her links with the Otago Branch of the Federation long after her shift north. The University of Otago awarded Ella its highest degree in May 1976 when she received a Doctor of Science for her contribution to botany.

Some members of the Botanical Society of Otago will remember Ella at the 14th John Child Bryophyte Workshop based on the Taieri in November 1998. Her enthusiasm (at 88) and the knowledge she passed on to young, and not so young, bryophyte inductees was inspirational. Ella died at Palmerston North on July 24, 2003 and is interred with her family in Andersons Bay Cemetery.

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Ella Campbell
in the 1930s
(Martin 1993)

