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Naming names: the first women taxonomists in mycology

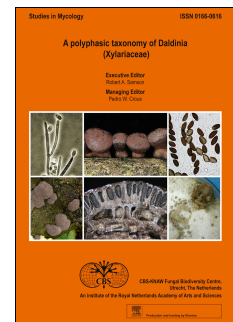
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Running Head: First women taxonomists in mycology

Naming names: the first women taxonomists in mycology

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Abstract: The transition from amateur to professional in natural history is generally regarded as having taken place in the nineteenth century, but landmark events such as the 1917 appointment of mycologist Johanna Westerdijk (1883–1961) as the first female professor in the Netherlands indicate that the pattern of change for women was more varied and delayed than for men. We investigate this transition in mycology, and identify only 43 women in the Western World who published scientific mycological literature pre-1900, of whom twelve published new fungal taxa. By charting the emergence of these women over time, and comparing the output of self-taught amateurs and university graduates, we establish the key role of access to higher education in female participation in mycology. Using a suite of strategies, six of the self-taught amateurs managed to overcome their educational disadvantages and name names — Catharina Dörrien (the first to name a fungal taxon), Marie-Anne Libert, Mary Elizabeth Banning, Élise-Caroline Bommer, Mariette Rousseau, and Annie Lorrain Smith. By 1900, the professional era for women in mycology was underway, and increasing numbers published new taxa. Parity with male colleagues in recognition and promotion, however, remains an ongoing issue.

Key Words: amateurs, fungi, gender studies, history of science, plant pathology.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Western science, the nineteenth century is generally regarded as the time when the great amateur tradition of natural history gave way to professional practice (Allen 2009). While this observation mostly holds true for men, the 1917 appointment of mycologist Johanna Westerdijk as the first female professor in the Netherlands indicates that the transition for women was much more uneven, varied and delayed (Abir-Am 2003, Whaley 2003: 99–116). A small group of women were able to make high-level contributions to mycology from the 1700s, but in most countries women like Westerdijk were still playing the part of female scientific pioneers well into the twentieth century.

Mycology was no different from other sciences in this regard, but the renaming of the Centraalbureau voor Schimmelcultures as the Westerdijk Fungal Biodiversity Institute provides a timely moment for reflection. Who were the first women participants in mycology? We answer this question with a focus on taxonomic mycology, a sub discipline with rich historical records. To become a taxonomist required access to education (including a knowledge of Latin), and to resources such as herbaria, colleagues and libraries, and the ability to publish. Modern mycological taxonomy began with Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) in the eighteenth century, and his only comparable female contemporary was German governess, Catharina Dörrien (1717–1795), who was also the first woman to name a new fungal taxon. Her achievement was not repeated for another half century.

The struggle over access to education lies at the heart of why women's participation in science has been delayed compared to that of men. Universities were restricted to male students in most Western countries until the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in England women could not take degrees at Oxford and Cambridge until the twentieth century (Olesko 2003b: 814). The wonder is not so much that there were so few women scientists prior to 1900, but why there were any at all. We explore the importance of tertiary (i.e. post-secondary) education to participation in taxonomic mycology by reflecting on the careers of six exceptional amateur women who named new fungal taxa prior to 1900 in the context of an overall cohort of forty-three female contributors to scientific literature across mycology in general.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The subject of the history of women in science has an established international literature. As a consequence, the broad features of this history have been outlined from ancient times to the present day (Whaley 2003, Ogilvie & Harvey 2000, Kass-Simon & Farnes 1993, Alic 1986). The major preoccupation of this literature has been Western science, and how women entered new fields as they emerged, and what they achieved. As Watts (2007) observes, the literature is 'a rediscovery of women who somehow had played a part in science and a discussion on the almost systematic exclusion of women from the higher echelons of science and why this should be so'.

Botany has been well served by historians of women in science due to cultural approval for women's participation in this discipline from the Enlightenment (Shteir 1999, Fara 2011). Creese (1998: 3) observes that papers in botany (in which she includes mycology), make up about 23 per cent of all journal publications by

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