



On Max van Balgooy's 80th birthday

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When on the 14th of August this year Dr. M.M.J. (Max) van Balgooy celebrates his eightieth birthday, we expect him to be at the herbarium to solve another identity problem or two of Malesian plant specimens in the Leiden herbarium collection, or especially sent to him by a colleague from abroad desperate to have his or her plants reliably named. For Max, the gently induced early retirement in 1994 (senior scientists in university service were thus encouraged to help budget savings in the nineties in The Netherlands) never meant the end of botanical research, it only opened the way to more freedom to devote time to his great passion: tropical plants. In recent years, that means spending quality time in Leiden with the herbarium collections overseeing the pre-identifications of all incoming specimens from SE Asia and the Pacific, alternating with prolonged stays with his wife Helga in their home on Bali.

Max was born in 1932 in Central Java from an Indonesian mother and a Dutch father. He spent his formative years on his parents' farm and in the surrounding forests on the slopes of Mt Slamet, satisfying his curiosity in the natural history of his agricultural and natural environment. The Second World War and Japanese occupation of Indonesia meant a hiatus in formal school training, but gave all the more time to explore the wonders of Javanese nature. High school (HBS-B) in Bandung was successfully completed in 1952, followed by a BSc in 1957 at the University of Indonesia also in Bandung; in both high school and university he was taught and inspired by the well-known pollination biologist Prof. L. van der Pijl. In 1958 he traveled to Leiden for his MSc study, for which he explored phytogeographical as well as zoological, ecological and ethological themes. Upon obtaining his degree in 1961 he joined the Rijksherbarium staff, initially unsalaried, later supported by a prestigious national research council grant. In 1964 he obtained a tenured research post at the Rijksherbarium, then an integral part of Leiden University. Under the stimulating guidance of Prof. C.G.G.J. van Steenis he made a comprehensive and critical analysis of all genera of phanerogams in the Pacific, resulting in his PhD thesis on 'Plant-Geography of the Pacific' published as a *Blumea* Supplement in 1971, and still a classic reference. In the summary of his thesis Max mentions unreliable plant identifications as the greatest potential source of error in this kind of analysis. No wonder, therefore, that he devoted so much time and effort throughout his botanical career to the identification of herbarium specimens. In his early years at the Rijksherbarium he was allowed to join the two formidable experts of Malesian flowering plants, Professor Van Steenis and Dr. R.C. Bakhuizen van den Brink, in their frequent identification sessions of incoming herbarium material. He would soon rival or even exceed their expertise and in the first decade of his retirement Max would make that collective

expert information accessible for a wider audience in his trilogy on Malesian Seed Plants (1997, 1998 and 2001), including a volume illustrating and defining diagnostic spot-characters of families and a large number of species-rich genera, and two volumes on the individual families of trees, shrubs, climbers and herbs in the Flora Malesiana area. This trilogy has rightly been hailed as a milestone in Malesian botany, and forms the basis of a later, and still current, project to produce user-friendly digital identification keys, web-based and on CD-ROM, jointly with the SE Asia team of the Kew Herbarium. Plans for a completely new edition to be published in Singapore are being rumored.

Throughout his career, plant collecting in the Malesian and Pacific region was a main preoccupation. Max made substantial collections in the following localities: Mt Wilhelm in Papua New Guinea (1965); Australia: Lord Howe Island, Northern Territory, and Queensland (1965, 1971); Tahiti and Bora Bora (1971); Malaya (1974, 1975, 1996); Sulawesi (1979); Hawaii (1982, 1992)



Dr. M.M.J. van Balgooy (photo by B.N. Kieft).

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New Zealand (1983), Maluku (1984, 1992–1994); Kalimantan (1986–1990); New Caledonia (1995); Sabah (1996, 1998), Manado (2003–2005) and multiple collections from Bali and Java. Fifteen species of plants and insects were named after him, including *Balgoya pacifica* Morat & Meijden (*Polygalaceae*) from New Caledonia.

Although priding himself on being a fanatic botanist or botanical nerd ('vakidoot', echoing his teacher Van Steenis), Max's life knows more passions than just botany. A very major one is sports, especially badminton. Following a respectable career with his wife Helga, whom he met on a badminton court, as high level competitors in this noble sport, Max was a national and international umpire for 22 years, retiring during a self-selected match of the Ladies' Single final at the Scottish Open in 1988. Good food and humor are two other hobbies from which his friends and colleagues have benefited. Max's satay and sataysauces are famous and have enriched many a Herbarium BBQ. Sketches in Indonesian Dutch presented during staff parties were another much-loved treat. On the occasion of Prof. Van Steenis' retirement in 1972 Max assembled and edited a collection of hilarious anecdotes under the title 'Steenisiana': a very important source for future biohistorians.

Throughout his career Max has felt part of the Flora Malesiana network initiated by Professor van Steenis. Members of that extended family from all over the world, but mostly from the Malesian region, are very much indebted to Max, especially for his continuing efforts to correctly (pre-)identify their herbarium specimens. Although not listed by the web of science, correct identification labels on herbarium specimens are in fact important mini-publications without which all subsequent highflying ecological, phytogeographical and other analyses based on botanical collections would be impossible. Max, many thanks for your continued efforts and for passing on your expertise to a younger generation. May you continue for many years with Helga at your side.

Selected references

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