

A SHORT LIFE HISTORY OF PROF. Dr. F.P. JONKER



This year Prof. Dr. F.P. Jonker, Frits as he is known among his friends, will retire from the formal academic life at the State University of Utrecht: a long and busy life of 49 years, devoted to teaching, administration, and scientific research. Looking back on all these years, one realises the important contributions that Jonker has made to botanical science in general and to palaeobotany in particular, both in The Netherlands and abroad, as well as the impact he has exerted on his surroundings, culminating in the vigorous activities of the Laboratory of Palaeobotany and Palynology at Utrecht.

To describe Jonker's life history is indeed to describe the history of his laboratory. To understand the significance of Jonker and the character of the "lab", we have to trace his life from its very beginnings at the town of Almelo in the eastern Netherlands, where he was born in 1912. His father and mother were teachers and both liked (wild) flowers. Thus both an intellectual and botanical background were already part of his life at a very young age. Soon Jonker joined a group of boy-scouts, where he combined his love for the outdoors with his interest in nature. In high school the biology teacher was Dr. J. Van Beusekom, an Utrecht botanist, who was at the same time scout-master of the scout group. In these formative years, "de Beus" was a decisive factor in influencing Jonker's career. It was largely because of Van Beusekom that Jonker went to Utrecht University as a student.

In 1929, at the age of 16, Jonker enrolled at Utrecht University where he was to study courses in botany by Prof. Dr. A.A. Pulle and Prof. Dr. F.A.F.C. Went. He was a clever student, and already in 1932 he obtained, among the first of his class, his "candidaats" (B.Sc.) in botany and in 1934 his "doctoraal" (M.Sc.) in botany. In 1933, J. Lanjouw, at that time the conservator at the Botanical Museum and Herbarium at Utrecht, went to Surinam and Jonker was called upon to assist in teaching as assistant "buiten bezwaar", a position without any salary whatsoever. In 1934, the second assistant, Dr. S.J. van Oostroom went to Leiden University and Jonker was appointed in his place.

In addition to his academic activities, Jonker remained active in boy-scouting. After his "doctoraal", he became scout-master of a group in Utrecht.

Both in this function and during botanical excursions he could satisfy his great passion for outdoor life. Already before the Second World War he joined excursions to the Eifel (1936), to Tirol (1937) and to Wales (1939). After the War he participated in numerous excursions to foreign countries. But perhaps the most important excursions, for which Jonker became famous, were those to South Limburg and to Twenthe in the eastern Netherlands. Initially these excursions were for graduate students but in 1935 a floristic course for biology freshmen was established and for a long time Jonker was the stimulating leader of the Twenthe and South Limburg excursions. I am dwelling at some length on this point because for many of us our interest in the flora was ignited by Jonker and many people became so enthusiastic about plants on these excursions that they decided to make botany their profession.

In 1938 Jonker was appointed first assistant and for a short period he was the head in the institute when Pulle and Lanjouw were abroad. In 1939 Jonker was awarded his Ph.D. cum laude on his thesis entitled "A Monograph of the Burmanniaceae".

Jonker continued to combine science with scouting and he soon became assistant district chief for Utrecht and later "waarnemend" district chief. Because of this function he was imprisoned during the Second World War, when scouting was prohibited by the Germans. At the end of the War he organised, together with the major of Utrecht, both illegally active, a group of boy-scouts, to assist in all sorts of activities after the liberation of Utrecht in 1945. Jonker remained active in scouting until 1959.

In 1947 he married Anneke Verhoef who has been his life's companion ever since.

Jonker's first contact with palaeobotany was through Franz Florschütz, who in the early thirties taught pollen analysis as a hobby at the Botanical Museum and Herbarium. Soon Jonker joined Florschütz in excursions to peat-bogs in Drenthe. Next to his plant systematic work, he published a number of palaeobotanical papers with Florschütz. The latter left Utrecht in 1948, but Jonker's palaeobotanical interest was aroused. In 1950 he was appointed a "privaat docent" in Historical Plant Geography. Shortly before,

in 1949 he was appointed conservator. This rank was abolished half a year later, but on his door in the institute in the "Lange Nieuwstraat" the sign "Conservator" remained for many years and so many got to know him as the "Conservator, Mijnheer Jonker"!

In the time before he was appointed Full Professor in "special" botany in 1960, Jonker was active both in systematic botany and in palaeobotany. Pollen analysis was done in a room with a very low ceiling showing drawings of the most important pollen types, in the primitive ways of that time, without a hood and without much knowledge about pollen types. But under his guidance techniques and reference collections improved gradually.

In the fifties Jonker was also active in the K.N.B.V., the Royal Botanical Society of The Netherlands. He was secretary of the Commission for Plant Systematics and Plant Geography in 1953, president in 1954, secretary of the Commission for Biosociology and Peat Research of The Netherlands in 1954 and 1955, president in 1961 and he served for a long term as editor of "Acta Botanica Neerlandica" between 1955 and 1961. He returned to this editorship together with that of the now deceased journal "Wentia" from 1964 to 1966. The Botanical Society honoured him by electing him an Honorary Member in 1967.

In 1955/1956 Jonker went for the first time in his life to Surinam, followed by the "Emmaketen wildernis" expedition in 1959, also in Surinam. The impact this experience had on his scientific life is easily underestimated. With his experience in taxonomic work in many South American tropical families, to see all these botanical wonders alive, must have seemed sheer magic to him. It also made him critical of some of the methods of vegetation science developed in temperate regions.

After 1960 he began, as a Full Professor, to organise courses in palaeobotany for geology and biology students. It was on his instigation that a number of courses stressing the interrelationship between biology and geology, the so-called B-5 line of education in biology, was established. He also set out to develop an institute that would comprise both palaeobotany and palynology. Visits to Cracow, Poland (INQUA, 1961) and Lucknow, India (1964) impressed upon him the need to study palaeobotanical and palynological aspects of science under one roof. In the fifties, after the death of Prof. Dr. J. Jongmans, classical palaeobotany had become an almost non-existent science in The Netherlands. I vividly remember Jonker, sitting in his room behind the door with the "Conservator" sign, sometime in 1961, explaining that he would fill this gap.

Years of rapid expansion followed. The number of students increased and in 1963 the Palaeobotany section moved out of its room in the Botanical Museum and Herbarium, into "Fort Hoofddijk", an old fortress outside the town. For nine years, between 1963 and 1972 the Subdepartment of Palaeobotany and Pollen Morphology was housed in the fortress. During that time the staff increased. Next to the original section of pollenanalysis of the Quaternary, people specialising in pollen morphology, macropalaeobotany,

palynology of the pre-Quaternary, and aeropalynology were appointed to the staff. The small palaeobotanical collection which existed already in the twenties began to grow.

Between 1962 and 1977 Jonker was a member of the International Commission of Palynology — president between 1966 and 1971 — and it was in this function that he accepted the challenge to organise the second International Palynological Conference in Utrecht in 1966. It is difficult to estimate the very considerable impact this event had on the development of the subdepartment at Utrecht. But, at any rate, it became widely known after the conference as a centre for palynological and palaeobotanical activities. In addition, with the proceedings of the Utrecht Conference a new international journal, the “Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology”, was established.

Although at this time the institute was his most cherished child, Jonker was also active in many commissions, both at local, national and international levels. He was president of the Biology subfaculty in Utrecht between 1968 and 1971, president of the Royal Botanical Society of The Netherlands and president of the editorial board of the *Flora Neerlandica* from 1969 to 1971. He served as a member of a commission of the Netherlands Organisation for Pure Scientific Research, of the “Van Eeden Fonds”, in the commission for “Theologisch Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs” of the Synode of the Dutch Reformed Church and as an advisor of the “Treib Maatschappij”.

In 1972, the now rechristened Laboratory of Palaeobotany and Palynology moved to its new quarters in the Transitorium-2 building at the Uithof campus of the Utrecht University. Here the laboratory found adequate facilities necessary for its expanding activities. In room 001 Jonker was the nerve centre of the laboratory, the room where many of the formal contacts with the outside world were established. In 1977 a museum exhibiting palaeobotanical collections from the various periods of earth history was opened.

In the last few years the complexity of all the activities in the laboratory, the change to different organizational structures within the university may, at times, have perplexed him, but Jonker always insisted on lecturing himself in person. Very characteristically he considered this his duty, a view that was held in high esteem by all. He would return from an interesting trip outside The Netherlands simply because he had to deliver a lecture to undergraduate students.

When we look back at his career from the very beginnings we can still recognise the man who loved to be in the field explaining the diversity of nature to students, and keying out species with a *Flora* in his hand. We know it was a difficult moment for him when he had to abandon most of the active participation in field trips, but Jonker has not changed. Throughout his professional life he has always remained a florist and taxonomist both in actuo- and palaeobotany. During the years of expansion not much time was left for scientific work, but his most recent papers dealing with evolutionary tendencies in the Plant Kingdom could not have been written without his

formidable knowledge of past and present plant life accumulated during many years. For his life's work he was appointed a distinguished Founder Fellow of the Palynological Society of India in 1973. One year later he obtained the Gunnar Erdtman International Medal for Palynology, handed to him at the First Indian Palynological Congress held at the Punjab University, Chandigarh, in India.

Having been so active during so many years Jonker deserves a rest in which to travel around and to do his own scientific work, liberated from administrative and organisational duties. Frits is leaving and although life will be different from now on, his mark on the Laboratory of Palaeobotany and Palynology cannot be erased. We join in our sincere tribute to a truly outstanding scientist and a stimulating teacher.

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