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A pioneer in science

To help celebrate the 1991-93 Suffrage Centennial Year the Nelson Evening Mail is offering a series of profiles to coincide with monthly themes designated by the Nelson women's suffrage centennial celebration committee.

The month of November has the theme of science and technology — and one of the country's first women to break into this male-dominated discipline was Lady Kathleen Rigg.

Today **MARTIN JOHN-STON** profiles this pioneering Nelson scientist.



Dr Kathleen Curtis, later to become Lady Rigg, from a group photo at the opening of Cawthron Institute in 1921.

LADY Kathleen Rigg was on her way to becoming a leading New Zealand scientist in 1920, at a time when society pressed most women to conform to traditional female roles.

In 1992, on the eve of the centennial year for women's suffrage in New Zealand, the women's movement and women have made great advances here. Not only do women have the vote, but also they have similar opportunities to men to pursue education and enter the paid workforce and public life.

This is not to say that women have achieved equality with men, but clearly the balance has moved markedly toward equality since 1920.

At that time Lady Rigg, then known as Dr Curtis, joined Nelson's Cawthron Institute as one of its founding members. Her field was mycology, the study of fungi.

Lady Rigg, who has lived at Stoke's Whareama Home for many years, celebrated her 100th birthday in August this year.

In the 1910s, she won a string of scholarships while studying for a master of arts degree at Auckland University. The Orient Shipping Company's Travelling Scholarship took her to London, where she entered the Imperial College of Science.

She advanced her already-distinguished academic career by gaining the college diploma and the Huxley Gold Medal for Research. She was granted further scholarships by the college and went on to secure a doctor of science (DSc) degree from the University of London. She was later made a fellow of the Linnean Society.

Auckland University botany professor Peter Lovell says in a letter to Lady Rigg on her 100th birthday that he suspected she was the first botany student at the university to have been awarded, in 1915, the prestigious 1851 Exhibition Science Scholarship.

Author David Miller says in his book, *Thomas Cawthron and the Cawthron Institute*, that Lady Rigg's thesis in London "was cited by the university authorities as the most outstanding result in mycological research that had been presented for 10 years".

"With such accomplishments and her intimate knowledge of plant diseases and fungi in general, and inspired by her enthusiasm for research, Dr Curtis entered wholeheartedly into her work at the Cawthron Institute."

Lady Rigg quickly gained, and retained throughout her career, the confidence and respect of her colleagues in the institute's other branches and of the primary producers in the Nelson region, Dr Miller says.

Her earlier successes included contributions to the control of apple black spot and the brown rot of stonefruits. She devoted constant attention to curing the many diseases that afflicted the region's agriculture, horticulture and forestry.

She also took a keen interest in the cultural life of the community, being particularly interested in music, says Dr Miller.

Her scientific research was rewarded by her being made a fellow of the Royal Society, in 1936. She is now the society's oldest surviving fellow. She retired from Cawthron in 1952.

Lady Rigg says her years at Cawthron were "a happy time, (although) it's rather a long way back".

Her mental health deteriorated earlier this year after a fall and she is now very frail.

Doubly significant

Women's history author and publisher Coral Broadbent says Lady Rigg's achievements are doubly significant since she is a woman.

"There were enormous barriers for all women who were seeking higher education. Even for a girl to go on to secondary education was an achievement at the time. Then moving into highly male-dominated areas like science was quite outstanding."

"Only a woman of rare perseverance, intelligence and courage could have achieved in that environment. Single-mindedness would have been absolutely essential."

The first women to study at universities were treated, in some cases, with contempt, Ms Broadbent says. Women could find their gender went unrecognised in groups of men sometimes addressed as "gentlemen".

She says it appears to have been easier for women studying the arts. Female students tended to be channelled into the arts, and "acceptable" occupations.

Lady Rigg's friend and retired Cawthron research

er Joyce Watson agrees. Miss Watson worked Cawthron as a plant research chemist from 1941-1978 after graduating with a master of science (MSc) degree from Canterbury University.

"In those days there weren't many women going through and doing degrees ... science degrees most of them were arts degrees and most of them went on to teaching. There were very few who went into scientific work."

Miss Watson said she was the only woman in her year to go on to do an MSc in chemistry in a class that included about 12 men.

Ms Broadbent says another barrier to be faced was the choice women were forced to make between academic achievement and marriage.

It was just one of many social prohibitions women. It was a reason why many women did not go further in academic work, she says.

Men, clearly, did not face the choice between academic achievement and marriage.

Dr Curtis did not marry until 1969, when she married former Cawthron director, the late Theodore Rigg.

Miss Watson says she cannot recall any ban women staff at Cawthron marrying and retaining their jobs — although neither can she recall a married woman working there in her earlier years at the institute.

The late Elisa Kiddson, who was seconded from the former DSIR to work at Cawthron, was another prominent woman scientist who did not marry.

Happiest time

"I think the happiest time of her life was her five years with Sir Theodore. They were touring quite a lot. He looked after her well and fussed over her a lot. It seemed to work very well indeed."

Miss Watson recalls going on "fungal walks with Lady Rigg, for instance in the Brook Reservoir area. Lady Rigg was very keen on finding toadstools and has a species of puffball fungus named after her. *The claustrula fischeri curtis* was first found, by Lady Rigg, in the Dun Mouta Fringed Hill area.

Miss Watson says Lady Rigg's DSc degree was even more prestigious than a doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree. Lady Rigg and Dr Kiddson were both "really brilliant women".

Lady Rigg was a foundation member of the Federation of University Women's Nelson branch. She was president from 1954 to 1956. Another former branch president, Karen Glasgow, says Lady Rigg was ahead of her field.

"I don't think any of us realised she was ahead of her time. We just knew her as a rather precocious lady who expected her ideas to be carried out."

When she became president, she "quite changed the direction" of the branch, says Mrs Glasgow.

Lady Rigg was the driving force that saw the branch join the National Council of Women in press for the extension of jury service to women.

Since that time, the Nelson branch of the federation has always been well represented on council, both nationally and at the local level, Ms Glasgow says.

Lady Rigg signed up support for the jury service issue since she was determined that women should play their part in the community.

"Just as she was ahead of her time in her profession, she was also ahead of her time in ideas on the part women should play in the community."

Lady Rigg was never overbearing, but she was always "quite certain what had to be done. This possibly due to her scientific training," Ms Glasgow says.

Eric Chittenden, another retired Cawthron researcher, recalls that Lady Rigg was a dedicated mycologist who was "a most methodical person to work for".

He considers she was over efficient as a scientist, "which hindered her more than helped her. She is a nice person anyway," he says.

Ms Broadbent says that another factor hindered women from entering male-dominated areas of work earlier this century was the virtual absence of adequate role models.

This may have started to change by the time Lady Rigg was deciding on her career path, Broadbent says.

Dr Kiddson had the benefit of the role model provided by her contact with the Henderson family in Christchurch. Stella Henderson was the first New Zealand woman parliamentary journalist, the second to gain a law degree. Her sister Elizabeth McCormbs, was the country's first woman MP.



Lady Rigg, now aged 100 and resident at Nelson's Whareama Home: 32 years of work at Cawthron was "a happy time".