

ORBITUARY: Margaret McArthur Oliver 1919-2002

Emeritus Professor Ray L Specht

Annie Margaret McArthur was born in Ararat, Victoria on 6 December 1919. After attending The University of Melbourne (1938-1942) where she graduated BSc and MSc in Biochemistry, she undertook a post-graduate course in Nutrition at the Australian Institute of Anatomy in 1946, attended a training course in recording and analysing unrecorded languages run by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, obtained a post-graduate Diploma in Social Anthropology at the University of London in 1952, then, in 1961, was awarded a doctorate by The Australian National University.

Between 1943 and 1945, Margaret was employed, as a chemist, by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, where she was involved in the development of waterproof containers to transport foodstuffs to the troops in the tropics (McArthur 1945).¹ In 1947, after training in the Australian Institute of Anatomy, she became a member of the Commonwealth Department of Health Nutrition Expedition to New Guinea - from the Trobriands to the Highlands (Hipsley and Clements 1947).² Her initial Australian fieldwork was as Nutritionist with the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land during 1948 and 1949. Subsequently, she carried out fieldwork among the Kunimaipa of New Guinea in 1953 and 1957 (research which formed the basis of her Doctoral thesis — McArthur 1961³, 2000a⁴). She was involved in nutrition research in Malaya for the World Health Organization of the United Nations, and was Nutrition consultant for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Indonesia and Africa.

After employment as a Research Officer in the Institute of Advanced Studies at ANU, Margaret took up a temporary Lectureship in Anthropology at Manchester University. She did part-time teaching in Anthropology at the London School of Economics, and at the London School of Hygiene, and became Senior Lecturer in Anthropology in the University of Sydney from 1965 until her retirement in 1975.

Margaret married the distinguished American Oceanianist, Douglas Oliver, in 1975 and, from then on, lived in Hawaii. Margaret McArthur Oliver died in Honolulu on 12 May 2002 at age 82 after a long illness. Her ashes will repose alongside the remains of her parents and siblings in the cemetery of her birthplace in Ararat, Victoria, Australia. Numerous notes, photographs, and unpublished writings from her field researches in Arnhem Land, New Guinea, and Malaya have been deposited in the archives of the University of Sydney. These will form the basis of a fund being established, under the administration of the Department of Anthropology, to encourage and assist students and other scholars to utilise these records in the composition of publishable writings. The principal part of her monetary estate is to be donated to her

undergraduate alma mater, The University of Melbourne, for fellowships for post-doctoral, preferably women, candidates.

In 1948, a team of four specialists (Margaret McArthur - nutritionist; Brian P. Billington - doctor; John E. H. Moody - 'flying dentist' and Kelvin J. Hodges - biochemist) from the Australian Institute of Anatomy (Commonwealth Department of Health) joined the National Geographic Society Expedition to Arnhem Land to study the nutrition and health of Indigenous communities. Margaret McArthur and I worked together on two surveys of the ecology and nutrition of nomadic Aborigines at Hemple Bay, Groote Eylandt, and on Bickerton Island. A man from Woodah Island, who had married one of the Umbakumba girls, was the leader at both camps; he was a descendant of the clan who had killed one of Matthew Flinders' crew in January 1803. He ensured the success of these two ecological and nutrition surveys — providing information on ethno-botany from both Groote Eylandt and the mainland (Specht 1958⁵, 1999⁶). Margaret's third study was at Port Bradshaw where she undertook a nutrition survey on her own, while I concentrated on an ecological survey of the large sand-dunes extending from Port Bradshaw to Cape Arnhem. She accompanied the aboriginal party on their travels back to Yirrkala from Port Bradshaw, thus gathering valuable information on this aspect of nomadic life. At Oenpelli Mission where the Expedition had difficulties in their research with the local community, Margaret and Fred McCarthy eventually conducted a nutrition survey at Fish Creek with people who had come in from Central Arnhem Land. At all these camps, Margaret made a diary on food-gathering and food-processing by the women and children from dawn to midnight. Margaret also collated quantitative details on the amount of fish, turtle and game gathered daily by the men; it was only at the last camp that Fred McCarthy was able to join her to document the daily program of activities of the men (McCarthy 1948⁷; McCarthy and McArthur 1960⁸). The major sources of 'bush-tucker' were analysed by a biochemical team back in Canberra (Fysh *et al.*, 1960⁹). Over the next decades, further ethno-botanical studies of nomadic Aborigines have been made on Groote Eylandt (Worsley 1961; Levitt 1981, Waddy 1984)¹⁰⁻¹² and at Yirrkala (Yunupingu *et al.*, 1994).¹³

Margaret McArthur's 1948 nutrition survey was made under extreme difficulties; her research (McArthur 1960a,b,c; McCarthy and McArthur 1960)^{8,14-16} is virtually unknown today buried in the second volume of the Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Land; one of her papers is included among a series of recently published articles on the results of the Expedition (McArthur 2000b).¹⁷ Two further articles dealing with her pioneering studies have

been produced and these will provide a useful basis for future nutrition research (Specht and Specht 1999; McArthur *et al.*, 2000).¹⁸⁻¹⁹

It was regrettable that Margaret's health made her unable to attend the Fiftieth Reunion of the Arnhem Land Expedition (Specht and Specht 1998).²⁰ Margaret McArthur was an inspiration to all of her colleagues on the Arnhem Land Expedition in 1948.

Acknowledgements

Information on Margaret's career was supplied by Jean McNaughton, a student with Margaret at Melbourne University and a member of the Nutrition Team of the Australian Institute of Anatomy; her husband, Douglas Oliver, and Graeme Ward of AIATSIS.

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