

Eugène N. Marais and the Waterberg Cycad (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn)

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Summary

In this article the discovery of the Waterberg cycad (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn) is discussed. The role that Eugène N. Marais (1871-1936) had played to introduce this plant to science, confirms the contribution of the informed “amateur” in the community. It also demonstrates that Marais had exceptional observational abilities and was able to realise the value of his observations. Furthermore, it illustrates the continuous tension between functional and scientific writing, in which case one always casts a shadow over the other (or that the reader is constantly aware of one, while he or she is engaged with the other). The so-called Marais myth had been created by both himself and other people, but the story (and oral history) of the discovery of the Waterberg cycad contributes to a rectification of the myth of Marais-the-quack/charlatan/swindler and attest to his knowledgeable-ness.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die ontdekking van die Waterbergse broodboom (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn) bespreek. Die rol wat Eugène N. Marais (1871-1936) gespeel het om hierdie plant aan die wetenskap bekend te stel, bevestig die waarde van die ingeligte “amateur” in die gemeenskap. Dit bevestig ook dat Marais oor besondere waarnemingsvermoë beskik het en in staat was om die waarde van sy waarnemings te begryp. Terselfdertyd illustreer dit die voortdurende spanning tussen funksionele en wetenskaplike skryfwerk by Marais, sodat die een gedurig ’n skadu werp oor die ander (of dat die leser gedurig bewus is van die een, terwyl hy besig is met die ander). Die sogenaamde Marais-mite is deur sowel homself as deur ander persone geskep, maar die verhaal (of mondelinge geskiedenis) van die ontdekking van die Waterbergse broodboom dra by tot ’n regstelling van die mite van Marais-die-kwaksalwer/charlatan/boere-verneuker en getuig van sy kundigheid.

1 Introduction

It has been claimed that the South African poet, novelist, journalist and amateur scientist Eugène N. Marais (1871-1936) had not received appropriate acknowledgement for his ethological research on termites and baboons. However, Marais received full recognition for one scientific discovery, namely the

discovery of the Waterberg cycad (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn).¹ It is striking that those who wrote about the disregard of Marais as a natural scientist gave little if any attention to this botanic contribution.² This neglect is in sharp contrast with Cynthia Giddy's description of the discovery of this species as thrilling in her standard work, *Cycads of South Africa* (1989).

In Leon Rousseau's *Die groot verlange: Die verhaal van Eugène N. Marais* ("The Dark Stream: The Story of Eugène N. Marais") (1984), the discovery of this cycad is not mentioned at all, despite the fact that Inez Verdoorn, Marais's niece and the doyenne of South African botanists, described the Waterberg cycad and named it after Marais already in 1945 (see Verdoorn 1945). Marais became acquainted with this peculiar plant in the Waterberg when he lived there between 1907 and 1916, and he told Verdoorn about it a few years before his death.

Later, Rousseau noticed this gap in his account of Marais and for the first time wrote somewhat extensively about the events related to the discovery of the plant in *Eugène Marais and the Darwin Syndrome/Die dowwe spoor van Eugène Marais* (1998: 87-91). According to Rousseau, he indeed had an interview with Verdoorn about the cycad in 1963, but mentioned nothing about it in *Die groot verlange*. He gives the following reason for this omission (translated from Afrikaans):

This part of the interview was retyped fairly cryptically and was not of much value to me when I looked at it again years later. Unfortunately, I did not follow up this aspect. The absence of the cycad story is certainly the most important omission from *Die groot verlange*.

(1998: 87-88)

In this article, an incisive account is given about the discovery of the Waterberg cycad. Part of the new information presented comes from an interview Dick Findlay held with Verdoorn and is presented fully in 2.³ The discussion in this

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1. The name "Waterberg cycad" ("Waterbergse broodboom") for this cycad is used following Goode's (1989: 58) thereof. Other Afrikaans common names for the plant include "bergpalm" ("mountain palm") (according to Mrs Van Rooyen in the conversation between Verdoorn and Findlay (see 2), as well as in Steyn, Van der Walt & Verdoorn 1948: 758); "Eugène Marais-bergpalm" ("Eugène Marais mountain palm") (see *Die Volkstem*, 27.4.1945); and "wilde dadel" ("wild date") (see Steyn, Van der Walt & Verdoorn 1948: 758).
 2. Of all the (non-botanic) authors who refer to the Waterberg cycad, Mieny (1984: 144-145 and 1988: 16-17), Rousseau (1998: 87-91) and Van Reybrouck's (2003: 194-198) discussion of this discovery is the most comprehensive.
 3. In 1990, Findlay handed a conversation on tape to the author of this article. The interview about the discovery of the Waterberg cycad forms part of a longer

article aims to supplement the information that Rousseau (1998) and Mieny (1984 and 1988) give and to correct it with regard to a few aspects. In addition, information furnished in botanical studies but that has not been discussed in literary studies before will also be discussed to create a clearer picture of Marais's scientific contribution. In conclusion, Rousseau's (1998: 90) version that the Waterberg cycad has become "part of the Marais myth" (translated from Afrikaans) will be explored, and some summary remarks will be made about it.

2 Inez Verdoorn's Version of the Discovery of the Waterberg Cycad

Inez Verdoorn described the Waterberg cycad and introduced it to the scientific world. In the transcription of the interview Dick Findlay (DF) held with Inez Verdoorn (IV), which follows below, the botanist tells about the role Marais played in discovering the plant, how she tried to find the plant after Marais's death, how it was found on the farm Vlakplaas, and that she named the plant after the discoverer after she had gone there to look at it. For the sake of contextualisation, the transcription of the interview following below is annotated with explanatory notes:

DF: Tell me about your botanical ...

IV: About my botanical Well, that was, I think, it must have been in a couple of years before What year did he (Eugène N. Marais – JLM) die? '34?

DF: '34 or '35.

IV: Somewhere there. Well, I suppose '33 or '34.⁴ He must have been living in a house in Vermeulen Street. How on earth he got there I didn't know or why he should be there or how long he was there I didn't know, but he had evidently hired a room there. O yes, one of these men that wrote about him mentioned that room. How he went to see him there and that's when he got that shock, you know, when one day when he went in he had this queer smell which he afterwards realised was opium or morphine? I can't remember. Morphine.⁵

conversation he had with Verdoorn about Marais. Unfortunately, it is not known when the recording was made (Verdoorn passed away in 1989).

4. Both Verdoorn and Findlay remember the year incorrectly. Marais passed away on March 29, 1936.
5. Rousseau (1984: 428-429) mentions the incident of the Weiner boy who on occasion returned a book to Marais in his room and smelt something strange there. Years after Marais's death, the boy during his medical studies in London could identify the smell as morphine.

When he was living there he used to come to the herbarium,⁶ very like you do. Just walk into my cubby. You know, he was such an easy person to get on with. He was never ever any fuss, he never asked for the chief or wanted to see anyone. He just used to come and like you say: “Hallo, Inez”, you know, and then he would sit in my cubby-hole. It was a little bigger than this, sit in the chair and he had said he wanted me to name these succulents of his. He described them and I said: “No, I can’t name them from description.” He said: “Well, you come down sometime”, you know, and then he talked to me about that Whether it was the first, or second or third visit, he said: “What is the name of that cycad that grows in the Waterberg?” I said: “There is no cycad in the Waterberg. They are all in the Eastern country. We only know them from the Eastern Cape, Natal and the Eastern Transvaal.” I had just started working on cycads. Nobody else was interested in that at that time. So he said: “There is a cycad in the Waterberg on the Palala Heights!” So I said: “Well, that’s a shock to us, because we think there are no cycads in the West.” So I said: “I must see this cycad.” So he said: “I had sent a specimen to Dr Marloth in the Cape.” He was the chemist-botanist, and Uncle Eugène always knew everybody, you know, he knew about everything, and he had sent this specimen to him. So I said: “Ah well, we have just inherited Dr Marloth’s whole herbarium. He had died a little while ago and he had left his herbarium to Dr Pole Evans.”⁷ So I said: “Let’s go and look for it.”

Now I am so sorry that I didn’t today show you when you were there that very specimen.⁸ I looked through the Marloth herbarium, got this

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6. Until 1973, the herbarium was accommodated in Vredehuis, 590 Vermeulen Street, near the Union Building. Thereafter, the herbarium moved to the new building of the National Botanic Institute (currently the South African National Biodiversity Institute) in the Botanical Garden in the eastern suburbs of Pretoria.
 7. Thanks to the initiative of Illyd Buller Pole Evans (1879-1968), director of the Unit for Plant Industry (Division of Plant Industry), the National Herbarium experienced great growth during the thirties of the previous century and obtained quite a number of private herbaria (amongst which that of Marloth) (see Gunn & Codd 1981: 283-285).
 8. Marloth 13368 is the type specimen of the Waterbergse cycad (*Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*) on which the description of the plant is based (see Verdoorn, 1945). The international Botanic Congress in Montreal, Canada in 1959 laid down specific regulations for the nomenclature of plants. About the type specimen Gledhill mentions the following:
 The type in botany is a nomenclatural type; it is the type for the name and the name is permanently attached to it or associated with it. [...] For the name of a species or taxon of lower rank, the type is *a specimen lodged in an herbarium* or, in certain cases, published illustrations [my emphasis – JLM].
 (1985: 25)

Encephalartos, pulled them out, you know, and I was paging through, and he said: “There, there is my cycad!” and there he would see on this label (I must show it to you): “Nelspruit, Mr E. Marais collector” and then the note on, there is an envelope with some of the seeds in it: “These seeds were roasted and eaten by children and caused giddiness.” So he looked at that. He said: “Nelspruit? I never said Nelspruit!” He said: “In the Waterberg, on the Palala Heights!” So in front of him I scratched out “Nelspruit” and I’ve written “Waterberg” and then: “By E. Marais.” He said: “It’s Waterberg.” So I said: “Now, please, Uncle, let me . . . let’s find that thing,” and he said: “I’ll take you there, take you to the Palala Heights and I’ll show it to you.” And then sort of months would pass, you know, and I would not hear from him and soon after that I heard that he had shot himself.

So then I was *determined* that I would find this cycad. At that time, I had worked out two or three other points. You know, there were only about nine cycads known in the *Flora Capensis* and after I’d sort of struggled with them, there were four new species of mine⁹ and other people have come since and now we’ve got about twenty, twenty-one, twenty? In the twenties somewhere Number of the cycads Also resuscitated some and when I was investigating one in the Middelburg (what’s that place?), Botshabelo, you know, Toevlucht Most glorious place and the difficulty I had to get to this, because I had to do it all on my own. Nobody helped me those days. I took my mother for a holiday to Middelburg. She once said: “Why Middelburg?” (*Both laugh.*) Of course, I kept quiet. Then I got hold of the extension officer; he was a man called Toerien,¹⁰ and I told him about this Botshabelo and that he must take me there and there is a cycad. He broke down of course the day before. I had to come home. The car broke down on our way there, but I did eventually get there and this Toerien was very interested when I told him about the cycad there and my other experiences in Middelburg on cycads and I sort of got him interested in cycads and he said: “You know, I’ve been transferred to Potgietersrust.” So, I said: “Oh, wonderful! Now you’ve got to do something for me. You’ve got to go and find my uncle’s cycad on the Palala Heights.” And he said: “Good.” He would, and I thought that was last *sien van die blikkantien* (“seen of him”) again, you know. (*Verdoorn laughs.*)

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9. The four cycads described by Verdoorn are the *Encephalartos ngoyanus* Verdoorn, *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* Verdoorn, *Encephalartos humilus* Verdoorn and *Encephalartos lebomboensis* Verdoorn. Together with Dr R.A. Dyer she also describes *Encephalartos natalensis* Dyer & Verdoorn (see Giddy 1989; Goode 1989 and Jones 1993).
 10. Mr P.S. Toerien, an agricultural information officer attached to the Department of Agriculture at the time.

A few months afterwards I got a telegram: “Found Eugène’s cycad.” Ah! I thought, how wonderful! What shall I do? By this time Dr Dyer¹¹ had come (he was Mr Dyer then still) to the herbarium, you know, and he had become interested in cycads and in lots of other things that I was working on, and I said to him: “I must go, must go and see the cycads. I want to see it for myself.” He said: “All right”, he would work to see it with Dr Phillips.¹² So he told Dr Phillips that we wanted to go and see this cycad and we got money for the train, you know, and we telegraphed Toerien to meet us at Potgietersrust. It is a night journey and we got there in the morning and there he was and we raced off, and, you know, we went through this place called Bokpoort.

DF: Yes, I know Bokpoort.

IV: You know it too? And I was quite certain that it was in his *My Friends the Baboons*. You know the story of when he went with a doctor, with a surgeon. I am sure it was through Bokpoort.¹³ It had not been ... A road had not been made then. They went on horseback. So, I was very thrilled with the whole trip. Eventually we got to this place and there was this Mrs Van Rooyen,¹⁴ I think her name was Well, she took us up this little *rantjie* (“small hill”) and there were two plants. After I had made all the ... I got a picture of the two of us next to this cycad looking over the valley and she said: ‘There was the old homestead. I lived there. When I was a child, I often saw Mister Marais there, almost daily, and that is where that mountain palm grew. The children were so sick there. He assisted to get them right.’

And that’s when I started, you know, describing the thing and I thought then that it was very rare, but since then we found it on Kwaggaspoort and

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11. Robert Allen Dyer (1900-1986) was the Director of the National Botanical Institute in Pretoria from 1944 until 1963.
 12. Initially, Edwin Percy Phillips (1884-1967) was curator of the National Herbarium. From 1939 until his retirement in 1944, he was the Chief of the Division for Botany and Pathology.
 13. The incident is described in “Friendship between men and baboons” from *My Friends the Baboons* (1939: 78-85). It is the English translation by Marais’s son, Eugène Charles Gerard Marais, of *Burgers van die berge*.
 14. According to Rousseau (1998: 88) it “must have been Byb, who was brought to Rietfontein for her childbirth by her husband, Hans Purekrans”. This episode is described in Rousseau (1984: 237-238). However, note that Verdoorn quotes Mrs Van Rooyen later in the interview as if she saw Marais almost every day when she was “a child”.

we found it here in the hill near Middelburg, found it in the Wolkberg and it's turning up all over.¹⁵ And it was distinctly new.

DF: And you called it after him.

IV: And I called it after him. I had always said that I didn't like Germanic names with the Latin ones, you know, and I didn't want to call it after ... call any of my new species after people, but letters, but I was determined I would this one. And also, the recommendation was that you were not to have hyphenated words, but I was just determined that it was going to be *eugene-maraisii*!¹⁶ It can't be just *marais*, because there are too many Marais in the world, you know. So I had the hyphenated word. Somebody had years ago called a cycad *friderici-guilielmi* after Frederic

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15. According to Van der Westhuizen (1976: 5), the Waterberg cycad "is found endemically in the mountainous areas of Transvaal [currently the Limpopo Province – JLM] between 27° 50" and 30° 50" eastern longitude and 23° 35" and 25° 40" south latitude". Giddy (1989: 75) also mentions the wide distribution and various forms of the plant:

Various forms of this species occur in widely separated parts of the Transvaal. These areas are Middelburg, the Waterberg, the Wolkberg and much further east in the Mica district. They all experience very cold winters and the rainfall varies from 625 to 750 mm in the first two localities to over 1 250 mm in the Wolkberg.

Various populations of the Waterberg cycad (see Van der Westhuizen 1976: 5) led to the description of subspecies as well as the distinction between species. David L. Jones (1993: 191) sums it up as follows:

Specimens from the Waterberg Region are representative of typical *E. eugene-maraisii*, whereas those from the Middelburg Region are treated by some authorities as a distinct species (see *E. middelburgensis*), and by others as a subspecies (*E. eugene-maraisii* ssp. *middelburgensis* Lavranos & Goode).

The so-called Middelburg cycad (*Encephalartos middelburgensis*) is described by Robbertse, Vorster & Van der Westhuizen (1989).

16. According to Gledhill (1985: 29), the requirement of the International Botanic Congress of 1959 for names of species is as follows:

The name of a species is a binary combination of the generic name followed by a specific epithet. If the epithet is of two words they must be joined by a hyphen or united into one word. The epithet can be taken from any source whatever and may also be composed in an arbitrary manner. It would be reasonable to expect that the epithet should have a descriptive purpose, and there are many which do, but large numbers either refer to the native area in which the plant grows or commemorate a person (often the discoverer, the introducer into cultivation or a noble personage).

William.¹⁷ So I thought that if they can say, call a thing *friderici-guilielmi*, I can call it *eugene-maraisii*! (Both laugh.)

Inez Clare Verdoorn (1896-1989) was the daughter of Marais's sister, Georgie Verdoorn. From 1919 until 1951, she was attached full-time to the National Herbarium of the National Botanical Institute in Pretoria, and after her retirement, she continued her work in a part-time capacity until 1968. Thus, she contributed productively to her field of study until late in her life; a contribution stretching over 49 years and during which she published more than 200 works. The University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg honoured her with an honorary doctor's degree for her contribution to the study of South-African plants (see Gunn & Codd 1981: 361, and Fourie 1989). Verdoorn described several new species, but according to Fourie (1989: 315), the description of the *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* was one of the highlights of her career. Interesting enough, Verdoorn had no formal training as a botanist (just like Marais had no formal training as zoologist or medical practitioner/psychologist).

When Marais visited Verdoorn a few years before his death ("the first, or second or third visit", according to Verdoorn) and asked her the name of the cycad that grew in the Waterberg, he was fortunate to speak to someone who had a scholarly interest in the subject. Incidentally, during that time, Verdoorn had started doing research on cycads, which in the course of time would lead to the description of four new species. Thus, Marais could talk to an experienced and well-informed scientist about his discovery.

Marais's sending of plant material of the Waterberg cycad to Dr Rudolf Marloth, a Cape botanist, did not immediately lead to the "discovery" and description of this plant. This "living fossil" from the last half of the Mesozoic period, which began 250 million years ago and ended about 65 million years ago (see Goode 1989: 13), would have to wait for its name for a considerable time. As is evident from the transcription of the conversation between Findlay and Verdoorn, Verdoorn and the botanic world at the time of Marais's conversation with her did not know that cycads were also found in the western parts of South Africa. As Giddy (1989: 11) would indicate, cycads are found only in specific conditions: "On every continent they are found today only in those regions where climatic conditions are most favourable: the tropical and temperate zones." When Marais sent his sample of the Waterberg cycad to Marloth, the latter possibly had doubts if the Waterberg with its cold winters could be a suitable habitat for a cycad.

Marloth's possible scepticism about the presence of cycads in the Waterberg, which comes to the fore from the transcribed interview, is apparent from Marloth's entry on the label attached to the sample of a leave and a few seeds of

17. The *Encephalartos friderici-guilielmi* Lehm. is named after King Frederik Willem II of Prussia. According to Giddy (1993: 192), he was an early "patron of botany".

the plant that Marais sent to him. That can explain why he indicated the place where the plant material originated as “Nelspruit”. A very simple and also possible explanation could be that “Nelspruit” simply was a slip of the pen for “Nylstroom” or (more probably) “Naboomspruit”. He also wrote an existing name, *Encephalartos paucidentatus*, on the label. When Verdoorn (who initially was surprised about Marais’s claim of a cycad in the Waterberg) showed Marais the label, he was indignant about Marloth’s error (or distrust in his judgment?). Nevertheless, without hesitating and in Marais’s presence, Verdoorn entered the correct information on the label, namely that the plant came from the “Waterberg” and had been “collected by Mr Eugene Marais Date Dec 1927”.

Although Verdoorn claims that she was determined to find the plant, it took another ten years before she could observe and describe a living Waterberg cycad in its natural habitat. In the meantime, Dr Pole Evans, Dr E.E. Galpin¹⁸ and one Mr Steyn had collected samples of this plant in various places in the Waterberg and sent them to the herbarium in Pretoria (see *Die Volkstem* 27.4.1945 and Verdoorn 1945: 1). As Verdoorn said during the interview, she could go to see the plant personally only after an information officer of the Department of Agriculture, Mr P.S. Toerien, whom she met while doing research on a cycad in the Middelburg district, was transferred to Potgietersrus. After he had found a plant on the Palala Heights in the Waterberg, he notified her of it by telegram.

Verdoorn and a colleague, Dr R.A. Dyer, travelled by train to Potgietersrus to look at the plant with Mr Toerien. The small party found two plants there. Although Verdoorn in the interview with Findlay did not mention the specific place where they had seen the Waterberg cycad, it was on the farm Vlakfontein, according to a report in *Die Volkstem* (27.4.1945) that says (translated from Afrikaans), “Vlakfontein lies on the Polala Heights [sic – JLM] and can be reached through the Hangklip Mountains via Bokpoort.” During the expedition, the party travelled through Bokpoort in the Hangklip Mountains to reach the plants, which made Verdoorn think about an incident described in Marais’s “Friendship Between Men and Baboons” in *My Friends the Baboons* (1939). In the section to which Verdoorn refers, Marais relates that Mr Piet van Rooyen of the farm Purekrans fell seriously ill and that he (Marais) could not operate on him. According to Marais (1971: 65), he was “the only person in our whole region who could render medical assistance of any kind in those days” (translated from Afrikaans). The assistance of Dr Corkery of Warmbad (now Bela-Bela) was called in, and Marais and Van Rooyen’s son, Piet, went to fetch

18. The keen amateur botanist Ernest Edward Galpin (1858-1941) lived on the farm Mosdene near Nylstroom on the Springbok Plain during the last years of his life. During his lifetime, he described many new kinds of plants, of which 200 bear his name (see De Kock & Krüger 1972: 255-256). It includes the well-known monkey thorn (*Acacia galpinii*), the Pride of De Kaap (*Bauhinia galpinii*) and the torch lily (*Kniphofia galpinii*). The scientific name of the Waterberg cycad was nearly *Encephalartos galpinii*!

him at Naboomspruit (now Mookgopong). One of the “exceptional incidents that accompanied it” (p. 65 – translated from Afrikaans), was the big rock-fall that the party, who were travelling on horseback and a donkey (“with the heavy medicine and instrument case of the doctor in front on it”, p. 68 – translated from Afrikaans), encountered in the narrow pass.

According to Verdoorn, Mrs Byb van Rooyen, the spouse of Hans van Rooyen of the farm Vlakfontein, went to show her and Dr Dyer the cycad “up this little hill”. According to Verdoorn, Mrs Van Rooyen could still remember how she had seen Marais as a child “almost every day”. Van Rooyen told about the children who fell ill after eating some of the seeds of the cycad. According to her, Marais “helped to get them [the children – JLM] right” (translated from Afrikaans).

A few unclarities exist about the poisoning of the children, but Mrs Van Rooyen undoubtedly remembered such an incident in which Marais had been involved some time or another in the past. The article in *Die Volkstem* mentions that children in 1926 “fell seriously ill because of ‘wild dates’ they had eaten” (translated from Afrikaans). Marais, who was then “visiting on the farm, treated them” (translated from Afrikaans). This information raises the presumption that Marais indeed visited the Waterberg again after he had it in 1916 (see 3).

According to the mentioned report in *Die Volksblad*, Marais sent some of the seeds to Dr Marloth, probably because he would be able to identify the plant with his knowledge of pharmacology and botany. He possibly would also know if the seeds of the plant were toxic and if so, why. However, in the article in the *Journal of South African Botany*, in which the new species was announced formally, Verdoorn indicates the year in which Marais sent the sample to Dr Marloth as 1925.

Verdoorn’s interest in the (possible) toxicity of the seeds of the *Encephalartos* continued, as is evident from Steyn, Van der Walt and Verdoorn’s (1948) article titled “The seeds of some species of *Encephalartos* (cycads): A report on their toxicity,” in which hints are given regarding the treatment of poisoned persons. In the article, Marais’s observation is referred to as follows:

According to information supplied by Eugène Marais to one of us (I.C.V.), human beings who had eaten the roasted “nuts”, became very dizzy.

In the conversation with Findlay, Verdoorn mentions how important it was for her to name the cycad after her uncle. For her, it was not sufficient to name the species only *maraisii*, because there are so many other Marais (in South Africa). On the analogy of the *Encephalartos friderici-guilielmi*, and in accordance with the laid-down rules for naming plants, she decided on the name *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*. According to Aida Thorne, the rule is as follows (translated from Afrikaans):

If the author is not the real collector or “discoverer” of the plant or animal, he may decide to eternalise the name of the person who collected or described the

first sample, or that of a renowned personality who had something to do with the section of nature or field of study in general, in the scientific name.

(1990: 135)

With this name, Verdoorn would see to it that Marais's name (as the discoverer) as well as her own (as the author who described the plant and validly published the name for the first time) would be linked to this plant species in future. Indeed, Marais's fine perceptivity and knowledge were the starting point.¹⁹ As J.L.B. Smith (1969: 55) was able to recognise the coelacanth at first sight (based on a sketch), Marais must have known much about plants to recognise the Waterberg cycad in a region where nobody else had discovered cycads before and in a period before a general interest in cycads developed and they became "fashion" plants, as it were.

3 The Marais Myth

For Rousseau (1998: 90), the Waterberg cycad is "part of the Marais myth". Following the preceding discussion on aspects of the discovery of the cycad and the naming of this species to Eugène N. Marais, as well as the discussion of other facets of his life and work that are relevant for this matter, it is apt to ask what the so-called "Marais myth" entails. In a study about the scientific writings (and activities) of a versatile figure like Marais, it seems to be more than appropriate to make a few remarks about this. Indeed, the credibility of Marais's scientific work and writings is at stake.

What is meant by "myth"?

Much has been written about the concept "myth", much of which apparently is not relevant for this discussion. D.H. Steenberg (1992: 212) confirms that contrasting definitions have already been given for the concept "myth". According to him, "the conception of the nature of a *myth* [...] will vary depending on whether the researcher's approach is historic, philosophical-theological, sociological, in-depth psychological, aesthetic or more over-

19. Mieny (1988: 16-17; see also 1984: 145) mentions a second discovery that ran parallel with the discovery of the Waterberg cycad (translated from Afrikaans):

In the conus [of the *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii* – JLM], Dr Verdoorn found a little auger beetle with a little trunk or proboscis that made it look just like a little elephant. The appearance differed from all the beetles she had found in cycads previously. Later, this beetle was identified at the Imperial Institute of Entomology in London as entirely new and of great taxonomic importance.

They called it *Apinotropus verdoornii*.

Also see Jordan (1945: 111-112). The name that Jordan gave to the beetle is *Apinotropis verdoornae* and not *Apinotropus verdoornii*, as Mieny indicates erroneously in the quotation.

arching”. Maybe it will be useful to determine how the meaning of the concept has changed in the course of time. Cuddon’s overview of the historic development of the concept “myth” seems like a good point of departure:

(Gk *muthos*, “anything uttered by word of mouth”). It is a term of complex history and meaning. Homer used the word *muthos* to mean narrative and conversation, but not a fiction. Odysseus tells false stories about himself and uses the term *muthologenevein* to signify “telling a story”. Later, Greek *muthos* is used to mean fiction. Plato refers to *muthoi* to denote something not wholly lacking truth but for the most part fictitious. It has been surmised that the transition of *muthos* to mean fiction may have been helped by a kind of association with *muein*, “to initiate into secrets” (hence, mystic, mystery). The word *muthikos* (“mythical”) went into Latin as *mythicus*. *Muthos* has also been equated with the Latin *fabula* (*q.v.*). Nowadays a myth tends to signify a fiction, but a fiction which conveys a psychological truth.

(1998: 525)

In view of the above-mentioned quotation, it would be difficult to define the so-called “Marais myth”. However, it is indeed clear that in the course of time, the concept “myth” got the meaning of a “narrative” or “story”; thus, a narrative or folklore of some kind in which elements of fiction or even lies are present. According to Van Gorp (1991: 262), originally in Greece, the myth “was used in a pejorative sense [...] for everything that is in conflict with reality” (translated from Dutch). Further, it can be inferred that language forms an intrinsic part of the process. For Roland Barthes (1972: 111), the myth in fact is “a type of speech”.

If there is talk of a Marais myth or myths, it would have been created by various people. The myth(s) must also be present in writings about Marais and/or in the folklore or narratives about him. In some way or another, it has to do with language. Firstly, Marais himself could have created the Marais myth(s) consciously or unconsciously. Secondly, others could have created the myth(s) consciously or unconsciously: people who wrote about Marais, who had first-hand or transmitted recollections of him, and the few who knew Marais personally and possibly are still living. According to Mieny (1984: 138), “fables” often originate around great and genial figures, of which some have been created by themselves and others have been fabricated by their admirers” (translated from Afrikaans).

Examples of possible myths that Marais created about himself include the following:

1. Marais claimed that he was a doctor, or at least, that he studied medicine in Europe. “In 1896, I went to Europe, where I studied medicine for some time. I attended a private clinic in London” (Marais, as quoted in Mieny, 1984: 138 – translated from Afrikaans). Rousseau (1984: 133) could not

- confirm these claims. Nevertheless, in the Waterberg, Marais was known as the “wonder doctor”, and he indeed assisted people medically.
2. Marais told his son that he “started using morphine as a young journalist due to exhaustion and sleeplessness; to the people of the Waterberg that he constantly had pain due to chronic appendicitis; and to the young Dr Kestell in Heidelberg that the Portuguese administered it as a cure for malaria” (Mieny 1984: 145 – translated from Afrikaans).
 3. The representation that Marais made of his observations in the Waterberg are sometimes regarded as exaggerated. For example, in “Die wêreld se grootste bome staan in S.A.” (“The World’s Largest Trees Stand in South Africa”) in *’n Paradys van weleer en ander geskrifte* (“A Paradise of the Past and Other Writings”) (1965), Marais writes about the exorbitant dimensions of a giant black monkey thorn (*Acacia burkei*) along the Magalakwen produced by a surveyor who “accompanied” him and Jan Wessel Wessels. Since then, botanists like Dr F. von Breitenbach regard the claims in the article as exaggerated (see Rousseau 1998: 104-105).

Examples of possible myths that other persons created about Marais include the following:

1. Despite the versatility of his oeuvre, Marais is regarded mainly as a poet in Afrikaans, while he wrote a number of meaningful works of prose besides about 63 poems. Statements by Preller (1925: 180), Malherbe (in Nienaber 1947: 13-14), Nienaber-Luitingh (1962: 7), Dekker (1974: 55) and Roos (1998: 32) contributed to this mythologising.²⁰
2. Keyan Tomaselli (1989: 150) indicates that the official presentation of Marais (e.g. in school handbooks) is one-sided and superficial, and that less pleasant facets of his life, for instance his addiction to morphine and his resistance against Pres. Paul Kruger, are withheld. However, M. Nienaber-Luitingh (1962: 31) points out the role Marais played after the Jameson raid as mediator between the Executive Council and the Reform Committee (translated from Afrikaans): “Marais, who opposed the politics of the Transvaal Government for many years and often with fierce words, did not hesitate for one moment to avail himself for service in that same Government when foreign forces threatened the continued existence of the Republic.” The extensive research that Carel van der Merwe (2015) undertook provides a more nuanced view of Marais’s role during the Anglo-Boer War.

20. Renée Marais (1993: 11) indicates that several factors contributed to the way in which Marais “is canonised and even mythologised” in Afrikaans literature. “In my opinion, the manner in which his poetry was published over the years and the reception that came its way greatly contributed to this” (translated from Afrikaans).

3. The person who thus far played the greatest role in forming the image that exists of Marais, as well as in his popularising and mythologising, is Leon Rousseau. In *Die groot verlange*, he presents a comprehensive view of Marais's life history, while he also edited several publications of Marais's work (amongst others his binary *Versamelde werke* ["Collected Works"]) and produced a new publication, *Eugène Marais and the Darwin Syndrome/Die dowwe spoor van Eugène Marais*, in 1998. In her discussion of *Die groot verlange*, Elize Botha (1987: 103) points out that Rousseau's preoccupation with the role that morphine played in Marais's life "leads to one-sidedness in interpreting data" (translated from Afrikaans). The reader experiences "the reduction of data to morphinism as a simplification". According to A.P. Grové (*Hoofstad* 29.11.1974), Rousseau in *Die groot verlange* "undoubtedly brought greater clarity about quite a number of aspects of Marais's life. However, I doubt if we have come down to the basic reality everywhere. As a matter of fact, I believe this book can benefit from a followed-through process of demythologisation" (translated from Afrikaans).

From the few examples of mythologising by Marais himself and other persons who wrote about his life and work, it is clear that the reader of texts by and about Marais cannot accept that he/she always has to do with the "basic reality". In the course of time, several aspects of Marais's life and work have become obscured by half or distorted truths peculiar to the myth. It does not make it easy to make simple assumptions and inferences. Even about Marais's discovery of the Waterberg cycad, quite a number of "erroneous" views exist, as pointed out in this article.

Rousseau's mythologising of Marais largely centres on the presentation of Marais as somebody whose behaviour was determined almost entirely by his addiction to morphine. In a later publication about Marais, *Eugène Marais and the Darwin Syndrome/Die dowwe spoor van Eugène Marais* (1998), Rousseau has made no changes in this presentation of Marais. Similarly, the sober Mieny (1984 and 1988) does not do justice to Marais: Mieny's modernist view of professionalism in scientific practice makes him put question marks behind Marais's findings.

Nevertheless, the narrative of the discovery of the Waterberg cycad confirms the value of the informed "amateur" for scientific practice. Simultaneously, it confirms the tension between functional writing and scientific writing by Marais, to such an extent that one constantly casts a shadow over the other (or that the reader is constantly aware of the one while he/she is busy with the other). Separating the two from each other is a modernist project. Misia Landau (1984 and 1991) argues that elements of die fictional are always present in so-called objective writing. All things considered, the benefit lies in the fact that contemporary readers can look at Marais with bifocal lenses.

In this article, it has been endeavoured to let the “basic reality” talk. For the contemporary researcher about Marais, this reality is implied in especially the existing texts. The preceding discussion (amongst others about the Waterberg cycad) confirms that, for a researcher exploring aspects of Marais’s life and work, it is essential to consider all relevant texts (also those by natural scientists).

According to Mieny (1984: 138), “especially an analysis of the personal tragedy in his life, and understanding of his ‘worst ailment’, fills one with admiration for his contribution, despite the tragic wasting of his great gifts”. To a large extent, this statement about Marais is probably applicable to Rousseau’s representation of Marais in *Die groot verlanje*. Research that does not seek to reduce and provide easy summaries can possibly contribute more to presenting a richer multifaceted image of Marais to the contemporary reader. However, this does not mean that it is necessary to demythologise Marais to a bloodless figure at all cost.

4 Summary

The preceding discussion dealt with the scientific recording and description of a plant of which Eugène N. Marais is regarded as the discoverer. Botanists gave Marais full credit for the role he played in bringing the Waterberg cycad to the attention of the scientific world. The botanist Inez Verdoorn named the plant after him as *Encephalartos eugene-maraisii*. Since then, in the books scientists worldwide write about this species, they refer to “Eugène Marais, the poet and naturalist” (Giddy 1989: 75), “the Afrikaans poet, writer and naturalist, Eugène Marais” (Goode 1989: 59), “Eugène Marais, South African writer and naturalist” (Jones 1993: 191) and “the celebrated Afrikaans writer, poet, journalist, lawyer and naturalist, Eugène Nielen Marais” (Grobelaar 2002: 107).

In itself, the narrative of the discovery of this plant is worthwhile to relate (as truthfully as possible!). In her publication, *Cycads of South Africa*, Cynthia Giddy (1989: 12) mentions the discovery of the Waterberg cycad as “a discovery no less thrilling” as the discovery of another very rare cycad, the *Encephalartos woodii*, of which now only one male plant and its runners exist, and which was discovered by Medley Wood in 1895.

Apart from three paragraphs in *The Soul of the Ape*, Marais (1973: 95-96) himself did not write extensively about this “shrub-like tree belonging to the family *Cycadaceae*”. According to him it is “a rare plant and seems to have a very limited habitat. The leaves are a vivid green, and the tree bears a small palm-like fruit of a dull red colour when ripe. Among local people this fruit has the reputation of being extremely poisonous”. Arguably, the question can be asked why he did not record more particulars about this hardy and poisonous cycad. It can be speculated that, if he had written more about the plant, Marais probably would also have elaborated on the effect that the seeds of the plant have had on

humans and animals that ingested them on which he has focussed in the mentioned passages.

From what Verdoorn says about the conversation she had with Marais, it is possible that he was under the impression that the cycad was already described scientifically. Indeed, he enquired from Marloth (to whom he sent material of the plant) as well as Verdoorn (whom he told about the cycads in the Waterberg) what the name of the plant was. This provides proof of a more than ordinary interest in plants, as is also evident from Marais's article "Die wêreld se grootste bome staan in S.A." in *'n Paradys van weleer en ander geskrifte* (1965).

Together with his knowledge of and interest in the fauna and flora of the Waterberg, Marais had an extraordinary ability to observe, which enabled him to determine or at least to sense the meaning of his observations. His perceptivity actually came into its own in a particular knowledge context, which is part of the whole process of scientific practice. So, he saw the Waterberg cycad on the Palala Heights and wondered which species it was. Almost a decade afterwards, he ensured that material of the plant was sent for purposes of identification to the renowned botanist, Rudolf Marloth. Another few years later, he asked his niece, Inez Verdoorn, if she knew what the name of the plant was. This is proof that Marais continually reflected on his observations in the Waterberg and tried to explain them scientifically.

Elize Botha's (1980: 352) complaint against Leon Rousseau's *Die groot verlange* is especially against the way in which justice is not done to Marais as "many-faceted and enigmatic personality" in this life novel. "This multifacetedness is simplified, however, and the enigma is not resolved, because Rousseau places a strong accent on Marais as a drug addict and shows little of Marais's 'groot verlange' (the big yearning) for the wonder, the ecstasy".

In *Die groot verlange*, a comprehensive discussion of the Waterberg cycad (regardful of existing botanic publications) would have contributed to showing more of Marais's versatility and his "verlange na die wonder" ("yearning for the wonder"). Especially in the last years of his life, Marais had conversations with his niece (and wrote prose!) in which he reached out to the Waterberg with its plants, animals and birds. In Verdoorn's narrative about the discovery of the Waterberg cycad, the excitement and wonderment are clearly perceptible, confirming his scientific expertise and disposition.

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