

In Memoriam

M^{me} Marcel GAYRAL born Paulette ENGERBAUD (1921-2011)



M^{me} Gayral died suddenly on June 17th 2011 while she had planned to rest the month of August in Normandy. Without going into a detailed biography, I would like to pay a tribute to a lady who besides having been a figure of Phycology in France and a valued professor, has also been an example for me during her career at the University of Caen.

For many students in her time, university professors were feared « mandarins » and Mme Gayral, with her tall frame, was no exception. One of the rare female professors in the sixties, she managed to overcome her image of a « turbo-prof » – *i.e.* commuting weekly by train from Paris to Caen – and imposed her views on the campus, especially in Plant Biology next to two male colleagues. Her lectures on Algae (namely on the planktonic groups) which were clear, detailed

and remarkably illustrated, were for me, a young student at the time, a sort of revelation and I promised myself someday to examine under the microscope everything she had so thoroughly described to us. Her book *Les Algues ; morphologie, cytologie, reproduction* (1975) based on her lectures was for years a reference on the subject in french. With the help of her assistants of that time, Mme Gayral set up very soon in Caen a summer course in Phycology which trained generations of French or foreign students. Many years later I was in charge of this course which still exists today and I suspect that M^{me} Gayral's earlier book first published in 1966, *Les algues des côtes françaises (Manche et Atlantique)*, is still in use for the lab work of this summer course. Later on she co-signed with J. Cosson a profusely illustrated book with colour photographs titled *Connaître et reconnaître les algues marines* destined to a larger audience and this manual was frequently updated after its first print in 1986.

Having spent the early years of her career in Morocco (Rabat), M^{me} Gayral kept close ties with this country, training Moroccan students in her lab in France and teaching overseas in Morocco. This special relationship between both countries has been maintained by all of her various successors at Caen. In the intimacy of the *Laboratoire d'Algologie fondamentale et Appliquée*, « Paulette » (as we used to secretly call her) managed to have all of her collaborators and students benefit from her eclectic knowledge without restraining them to any particular field of research on marine algae. Sorting out the algae pertaining herbaria stored at the University of Caen, and amongst them the famous Lamouroux herbarium, was a great project that mobilized all of us for many months. During all those years in Caen, from macroalgae (Ulvales, Laminariales...) to microalgae (*e.g.* chrysophytes *s.l.* and haptophytes, groups where Mme Gayral and I collaborated mostly), from floristics to taxonomy, she also took us along the turn

to electron microscopy and understood the importance of maintaining a culture collection of microalgae for teaching and research. This collection which was considerably expanded by her various successors is now a technical platform at the University of Caen (ALGOBANK). A great number of publications which I will not detail here materialized the work done in the laboratory. Severe eye sight problems nevertheless plagued Mme Gayral durant the greater part of her career in Caen and the vision of our director manipulating her magnifying glass dangling from a long ribbon was a familiar image in the years back then until she retired in 1985.

For many years a dedicated *Secrétaire Général* for the Société Phycologique de France which she valued a lot, M^{me} Gayral was also a member of different scientific societies and participated actively (along with her husband) to meetings and other symposiums devoted to algae. A life-size (plastic) *Macrocystis* complete with its holdfast was brought back like a trophy from a symposium in California and for many years it stood proudly inside the lab. I also cherish a striking vision of M^{me} Gayral back in 1983, at the Chrysophyte Symposium in Grand Forks (North Dakota, USA), sitting between J. Pickett-Heaps and F. Round, and watching meshmerized a ritual (and howling) dance performed by a local Sioux tribe !

Promoted in 2005 to the rank of *Officier* in the *Légion d'Honneur* and ranking as *Commandeur* in the order of the *Palme Académiques*, M^{me} Gayral devoted most of her time in her last years to the *Comité de Sauvegarde de Meudon*, the city where she lived.

As a former student of M^{me} Gayral, later appointed Professor in the same University, I have always kept a vivid memory of her strong and brilliant personality and I am grateful for her scientific legacy. M^{me} Gayral fulfilled her dual mission of teaching and research and stood up to this quotation of one of our predecessors « Teaching is filling up a vase... but also lighting a fire ».

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