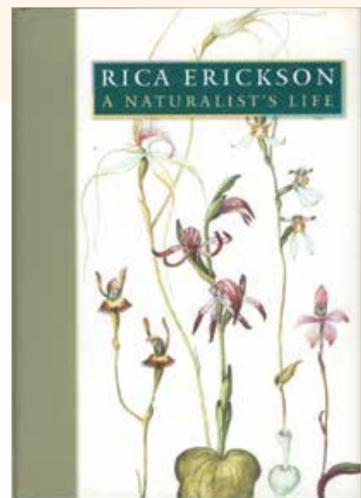




# Their Mothers' Daughters: an Australian Inheritance

## Part 1 Rica Erickson

*Diplolaena angustifolia*  
 Sept 1966  
 North of Guilderton  
 Numerous  
 closely spaced flowers  
 surround each style



Reflections on the lives of five generations of pioneer women in Western Australia seen through the eyes of a renowned botanist and her artist-jeweller daughter



Opposite page: Rica Erickson, Yanchep Rose, *Diplolaena Augustifolia*, watercolour.  
 This page: Dorothy Erickson: Yanchep Rose necklace

In 1853 a 17 year old Welsh girl, Phoebe Louisa Morgan, was orphaned in London when her parents, exiles from the Snowdonia area, died in a cholera epidemic in the borough of Southwark. Having seen and read about Australia at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and read about the excitement of the goldrushes in the newspapers of the day, she migrated to Victoria, soon married and went with her husband to the diggings at Bendigo. Phoebe set up in business catering for miners from her tent. Hers was

an adventurous life as the enterprising partner of three husbands. Widowed at just 23, Phoebe married again and became the proprietor of the Phoenix and the City of Sandhurst Hotels in Echuca where the Kelly gang came to stay for a night in 1880. Problems with her various husbands saw Phoebe's fortunes rise and fall—one tried to poison her to obtain the title deeds to her properties. Even her death was unusual. She died when a drunken hansom cab driver lost control of his horse, collided with



a tree and overturned the cab, mortally injuring Phoebe. Phoebe's daughter Frederica, who had been given a gold coin by Ned Kelly, was also married and widowed young and like her mother was also resourceful. She trained as a midwife to support her children and moved in 1906 to the goldfields of Western Australia where she set up her shingle in Boulder City and became a local legend as Nurse Cooke.

Phoebe's and Frederica's stories are told in *The Misfortunes of Phoebe* written by Phoebe's great grand daughter Rica Erickson (née Sandilands) whose paternal great grand parents had come to Australia in 1842 and farmed part of Melbourne's Carlton Estate at Bulleen before moving to Tallygaroopna.

#### RICA ERICKSON

Rica lived with her grandmother Frederica Cooke when her parents, Phoebe and Christopher Sandilands, moved from the dry and dusty heat of Boulder City to become pioneer orchardists at de Garis' garden city of Kendenup. This was following WWI when Christopher had served on the Western Front. Rica was a scholarship winner and

Top left: Nurse Cooke in Boulder wearing a goldfields brooch.

Top right: Rica practising for gymnastics.

She was athletic but not particularly decorous in 1923.

Left: Watercolour by Rica Erickson "Caladenia Orchids"

Below: Four generations in 1948 when Dorothy (left) was leaving for boarding school. Rica on the right.



prefect at the Eastern Goldfields High School and stayed to continue her schooling. The gender problem did not faze her as she said: "I could run as fast as any boy. I could jump further than most." She became a teacher until resigning (as was required in those days) to marry Sydney Erickson, a farmer at Bolgart. The goldfields link was there as his Swedish father had a goldmine at Broad Arrow. Rica became the celebrated naturalist, author, historian and botanical artist Frederica Lucy Erickson D. Litt, AO, Cit. WA. This is her story.

The Erickson farm at Bolgart was on the western edge of the Avon district—a beautiful place of rolling hills, granite outcrops white trunked gum trees and exquisite wildflowers. It straddles one of Australia's globally recognised biodiversity hotspots—an agricultural area of extraordinary species diversity, which contains more than a quarter of Australia's flowering plant taxa and 1.5 per cent of that of the world. Rica documented many of the beautiful wildflowers. Her paintings of many of them are in the Battye Library [www.liswa.wa.gov.au/erickson/index](http://www.liswa.wa.gov.au/erickson/index).

Rica and Syd's four children were schooled at home for their early education and encouraged to study the plants and insects that abounded on the farm. Daughter Dorothy was often seen with a glass and a piece of cardboard catching whatever flew into her orbit. Rica's research into the local plant life saw an orchid named for the family—the *Prisoner Orchid*—*Caladenia ericksoniae* and a number of other plants including *Acacia ericksoniae*, *Drosera ericksoniae*, *Stylidium ericksoniae*, *Stylidium ricae* and a genus *Ericksonella*. Rica also had the insects *Euryglossia ricae*, *Lysicelletes ricae* and *Asoropoda ricae* named for her while Syd had an interesting wasp *Sericphorus sydneyi* named for him and eldest daughter Dorothy a bee, *Hylaeus dorothae*, and a wasp named for her.

Rica Sandilands had exhibited her first botanical painting as an infant in 1915 in an Art and Industrial Exhibition in Boulder but commenced painting wildflowers seriously in the 1930s whilst a teacher in the country and it became a lasting interest. After her marriage when she exhibited her paintings in 1946 at the Wild Life Show in Perth she was persuaded by Dr. Dominic Serventy to write a book to go with them. *Orchids of the West* published in 1951 was the result. She expanded her career in botanical research into various families of the over 14,000 species endemic to Western Australia. New plants were named in Melbourne by botanist Dr. Jim Willis as the Western Australian government botanist was thought to be difficult. He did not appreciate anyone working in what he considered his territory. Rica was as tenacious as her ancestors and other books followed: *Triggerplants* and



Rica Erickson, Royal Hakea (*Hakea victoriae*) watercolour

*Plants of Prey*, the latter utilizing her daughter Dorothy as research assistant in Australia and London.

Rica painted and campaigned to try and save the biodiversity of Western Australian flora until cataracts made this impossible. However, historical research had claimed Rica's attention in the 1960s and she continued to be busy with that, becoming the author or editor of some twenty books on Western Australian botany and history and her enormous project—the Biographical Index and multi-volume Dictionary of Western Australians—was the first of its kind in the world, imitated in Canada and South Australia, and earning the gratitude of a multitude of historians. Once her cataracts were removed Rica began painting again



and was part of the Botanical Artists Group of wildflower painters exhibiting regularly in the 1990s. Her paintings hang in Pittsburgh USA, London and Australia.

Rica was a good organizer and a quiet achiever and awards came late in life. In 1980 she was made Citizen of the Year for the Arts in Western Australia and awarded an Honorary D. Litt. by the University of WA. In 1987 she was awarded the Order of Australia (General Division) for service to the arts particularly as an author and illustrator. In 1996 she became the first living person in Western Australia to have a park or nature reserve named in her honour. In 1999 she was honoured with a plaque in the paving stones in St. Georges Terrace. In 2000 Rica was one of 100 Australians selected to be featured for the opening displays of the new National Museum of Australia in Canberra. In 2001 *Rica's Stories* was published by the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. This was a collection of her historical essays. In 2005 *Rica Erickson: A Naturalist's Life* was published by UWA Press and was a compilation of her nature writings. In 2006, the year she published her last book, she was listed as one of the 100 most influential people in Western Australia's history and in 2007 Rica won a State Heritage Award. In 2008 she turned 100 and a book on the botanical artists group *Brush with Gondwana* was dedicated to her. An extraordinary life of great achievement.

Rica Erickson died in 2009 aged 101. In Part 2 of this feature, to be published in our next issue, the story of 'Their Mothers' Daughters' will continue with the life of Rica's daughter, Dorothy Erickson.

An exhibition was held at Bunbury Regional Galleries in 2013 of Rica Erickson's paintings and Dorothy Erickson's jewellery. Another exhibition is scheduled at Ellenbrook Gallery, WA, in late 2015.

Carolynne Skinner with Dorothy Erickson

Top left: Rica Erickson, Albany Cat's Paw (*Anigozanthus Flavida*), watercolour

