

*William Edward  
Blackall*

DOCTOR AND BOTANIST





After an honourable career as a medical officer, helping to raise two children and serving in the Great War, Dr William Blackall's passion for collecting and recording wildflowers couldn't be quashed. Little did he know, his some 5000 floral specimens and their illustrated keys would serve as the quintessential reference for identifying Western Australian wildflowers.

by Bruce and Peter Blackall

**W**illiam Edward Blackall was born at Folkestone, Kent, in England in 1876. Even as a small boy he was interested in wildflowers and roaming in 'the warren', a nearby nature conservation site. On one occasion, young William happened upon a man who was looking at a flower through a magnifying glass. The man, seeing the young boy's interest, allowed him to look for himself and the beauty he saw launched his lifelong interest and love of wildflowers.

Following his graduation as a medical doctor from University of Oxford in 1904, Dr Blackall and his wife, Ethel, migrated to Western Australia. When asked why Western Australia, he said he had heard how lovely the wildflowers were and he had accepted a position as a medical officer at the Fremantle Asylum, mental illness being one of his professional interests. Between building a medical practice, helping to raise two children and serving in the Great War, Dr Blackall could only rarely indulge his love of botany, slowly building what was to become the 'Blackall Collection' of some 5000 specimens of Western Australian wildflowers.

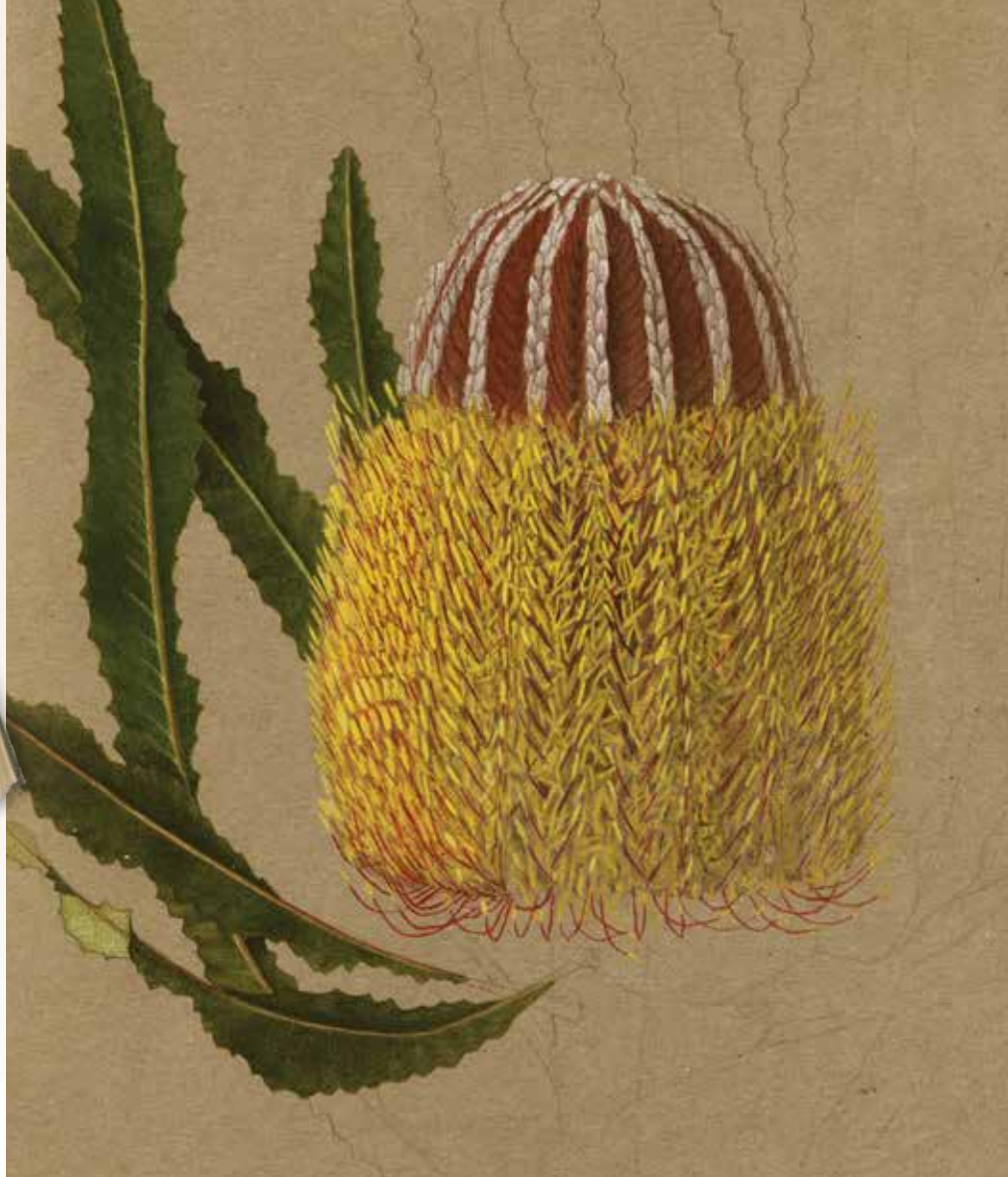
During the period from 1908 to 1910, Dr Blackall painted ninety-three watercolours of Western Australian wildflowers, now housed in the DBCA library. These beautiful paintings show Dr Blackall's artistic skills as well as his keenly developed powers of observation. The paintings incorporate detailed and carefully labelled drawings, illustrating floristic and structural features. This technique was to feature prominently in his subsequent flora identification project, an illustrated key designed to enable people with an interest in learning about wildflowers to do so even without significant technical botanical knowledge.

During the 1920s, Dr Blackall built a reputation as an outstanding and compassionate doctor, as a general physician, surgeon and obstetrician. However, despite his significant medical workload, Dr Blackall's interest in wildflowers remained. His collection of specimens continued to grow as did the development of his illustrated key. It was initially not known how Dr Blackall came to develop his illustrated key method. It was Professor Grieve from the University of Western Australia who formed the view that it may have been influenced by Gaston Bonnier's books on botany. It was not until May 1984 that a copy of one of Bonnier's books, purchased by Dr Blackall when in France during the war, was uncovered in the DBCA library, as it had been gifted by his wife after Dr Blackall's death in 1941. With the words 'mentor' inscribed in Dr Blackall's handwriting, the mystery was finally solved.

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**Main** Featherflower (*Verticordia etheliana*) named in honour of Dr Blackall's wife, Ethel.  
*Photo – Eddy Wajon/Sallyanne Cousans Photography*

**Inset far left** Watercolour by Dr Blackall of a species of spider orchid dated September 1910.

**Inset left** Dr William Blackall.  
*Images courtesy Blackall family*



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## VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Dr Blackall made many collecting trips around the State, the longest in 1931 when Government Botanist Charles Gardner joined him for the first two months of a nearly six month trip. The pair travelled in a converted delivery van,

**Top** Dr Blackall's inscription in Gaston Bonnier's book, including the date '1918' and the word 'mentor'.

**Above** The illustrated key in Gaston Bonnier's book that inspired Dr Blackall's method of identifying WA wildflowers.  
Photos – DBCA

**Above right** Dr Blackall's watercolour of a firewood banksia (*Banksia menziesii*).  
Image – Courtesy Blackall family

like those used by department stores in the 1930s, collecting wildflowers at every opportunity. The rough roads and basic facilities did not dampen their enthusiasm for the task, and in every sense, this was a 'voyage of discovery' by two explorers.

In 1935, Dr Blackall and Ethel spent some months in England, working in the Kew Herbarium. He had taken many specimens of WA wildflowers with him and, on his departure, left several specimens with the Herbarium. Back in Australia, Dr Blackall spent most of his time collecting and working on his illustrated keys, to such an extent his wife complained that it was becoming 'a tyranny of labour'. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to complete his work, dying of cancer in October 1941. Despite the sadness of his relatively early death, he left behind a wonderful botanical legacy.

This legacy, comprising paintings, herbarium specimens and a diary of his collecting trips, were donated by Dr Blackall's wife in May 1942, to what was then called the State Herbarium Board. The botanical collection is now housed at the Western Australian Herbarium. As important as these are, there was another component of Dr Blackall's legacy that was to have a lasting impact on the study of botany in Western Australia: the production of illustrated keys for the identification of the State's wildflowers.

Dr Blackall had started work on his illustrated key project in the early 1930s, but it remained incomplete on his passing, at which time the Government Botanist advised he was unable to complete the work as staff were committed to other projects. As a result, the manuscript languished for several years.





## COMPLETING THE KEY

In 1948, Dr Blackall's family commenced discussions with the Chancellor of The University of Western Australia and Dr Brian Grieve, then Professor of Botany, on whether there was interest in completing Dr Blackall's 'Key to Flora'. At that stage it was anticipated a single volume would be produced, with additional volumes in future years to supplement work done by the Government Botanist of the day. Approval for this work was given by the UWA Senate in December 1948.

The first volume 'How to Know Western Australian Wildflowers' by W.E. Blackall was published in 1954 and edited by B.J. Grieve. Further volumes followed and while credit is given for the original work done by Dr Blackall, enormous credit must also be given to Professor Grieve for his years of dedicated research in producing the many subsequent volumes.

Possibly the nicest compliment was a letter to Professor Grieve from Mrs Blackall in December 1958 where she wrote, "I only wish you had been here in his lifetime, what a help and pleasure it would have been to him to have worked

with you. You and the whole staff have been so very loyal to his name, my very grateful thanks to all of them."

## LIVING ON

In 1942, Dr Blackall was honoured by having a new genus *Blackallia* named after him; it contains just one species, *Blackallia nudiflora*. In the same year, a new species *Verticordia etheliana* was named after his wife Ethel Gray Blackall. In 1958, an everlasting daisy was named *Helichrysum blackallii*, now known as *Ozothamnus blackallii*. A further honour was bestowed on Dr Blackall in 1974 when a new genus *Nigromnia* was created, a play on the name Blackall. It also contains just one species, *Nigromnia globosa* (now called *Scaevola globosa* following taxonomic revision).

As a final tribute to Dr Blackall's legacy, the W.E. Blackall Prize in botany was commenced in 1953 by the Blackall family to be awarded to the student who shows ability throughout the Bachelor of Science with botany course, with the greatest promise in botany. The memory of Dr Blackall lives on through generations of young people with not only an interest in botany but also an interest in the wildflowers of Western Australia.

**Top left** Herbarium specimen of *Ozothamnus blackallii*, which was once called *Helichrysum blackallii*.

**Top** Bruce Blackall being shown the Blackall paintings by WA Herbarium Research Associate Margaret Lewington.  
Photos – DBCA

**Above** The volumes of Dr Blackall's 'How to Know Western Australian Wildflowers' have been reprinted many times since 1954.  
Photo – Jiri Lochman

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