

Muriel J. O'Brien, 1915-1985

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Muriel J. O'Brien, gracious gentlewoman of plant pathology, died 3 August 1985. Before her death, she started what would become a monumental contribution to plant pathology, the book entitled "Fungi on Plants and Plant Products in the United States." Her colleagues who completed the task dedicated the book to her. Much of this biography is prepared from their dedicatory statement.

Muriel was born on 10 April 1915, in Brooklyn, NY. She earned a B.A. degree at the College of St. Elizabeth, Convent Station, NJ, and an M.A. degree in English at Columbia University. Under the tutelage of I. E. Melhus, she investigated *Sclerospora graminicola*, the pathogen of "crazy top" of corn. She received an M.S. degree in plant pathology from Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) in 1947 and was employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a research plant pathologist in the Plant Disease Survey at Beltsville, MD. During her tenure with the Survey, she contributed considerable effort to Agriculture Handbook (AH) No. 165, "Index of Plant Diseases in the United States," which has been the most widely used publication on plant pathology ever issued by the USDA.

Muriel was assigned to Potato Investigations where she collaborated with A. E. Rich to produce AH No. 474, "Potato

Diseases," which earned the Society of Technical Communications the Award of Excellence in the category of "bulletin." With W. B. Rayner, she participated in research on potato spindle tuber, which led to the discovery by T. O. Diener that the causal agent was a viroid. She was later transferred to the Plant Genetics and Germplasm Institute where she worked on diseases of vegetables caused by *Verticillium* spp. and *Fusarium* spp. She was one of the first to recognize the potential of *Bacillus subtilis* as a bio-control agent for fungal plant diseases. Muriel was the author of more than 50 research publications. In addition to her participation with other authors to produce AH 165 and "Fungi on Plants and Plant Products," she compiled "The Genus *Sclerospora* on *Zea mays*" (1953) and "The Bibliography of Potato Disease Literature Through 1945" (1970).

Each of Muriel's biographers enjoyed many happy moments with her. It was apparent that many APS members thought highly of her. In an attempt to demonstrate their love, they conferred on her the title, "Miss Beltsville," at a Potomac Division meeting banquet. Upon being draped before her peers with a white sash emblazoned in red letters with Miss Beltsville, Muriel was, at first, irate at the presenters. When she returned to her table, she was hugged and congratulated for the recognition. Soon she realized that she had been sincerely honored by her peers, and her good humor returned.

Muriel became ill with leukemia but still expected to complete the "Fungi" book. Her passing was a great loss to plant pathology; she will long be known for her excellent publications, her help to others in identifying foreign or unusual pathogens, her concern for others, her positive attitude, and her aura of confidence and dignity.