

Dr Vivienne Cassie Cooper biographical information

Dr Vivienne Cassie Cooper has been a pioneer women scientist, forced to battle against social attitudes and stereotypes in producing her major work on New Zealand algae. She notes in an account of her life and career that a picture of her at age two climbing a stile on Waiheke Island (Little Everest) was symbolic, for she has been climbing stiles all her life.

After secondary schooling at Takapuna Grammar where her father was the principal, she completed a Masters degree in Botany at Auckland University for which she held a senior scholarship. She also enjoyed sport and tramping in the Waitakere Ranges. She won the Fowlds Prize for the top equal graduate of what was then known as Auckland University College, which provided two years funding towards her PhD, for which she studied intertidal areas around 200 miles of the Hauraki gulf, in all weathers.

In 1951 she took up a junior lectureship at Victoria University of Wellington. The Wellington climate and rugged coastline made collecting samples of marine algae even more challenging. Here she fell in love with Morrison Cassie, a marine biologist, and they were married in January 1953, two days after handing in the first draft of her PhD thesis. Modern regulations about examinations had not yet been developed, and although the examiner said the work was good enough for a DSc, it took eight months for the assessment of her final draft to take place and she suffered through a three-and-a-half-hour oral examination, and then a further two hour wait. She must have been made of stern stuff. Another two year wait ensued before she found a job at the Oceanographic Institute. Together the couple studied in the United States and also travelled in Europe, making new scientific connections.

Two children, born in 1962 and 1963 put an abrupt stop to her career. As she puts it, “The birth of a child meant doom to any ideas of continuing a career in science or almost anything else”. In 1964 they moved to Auckland where her husband took a university post and Vivienne managed to continue her research into marine plankton. But though she was initially promised a research grant, after five months her head of department declared there would be no grant, as her husband was earning a good salary. She continued on and published her results, although the said HOD ignored them. Tragedy struck at the end of 1973 when her husband died suddenly, leaving her with children of 11 and 12. But when she asked for a university job – after years of delivering lectures for others – she was abruptly refused. Fortunately, some months later she was offered a position in the DSIR, where she worked four days a week, six hours a day. By 1980 she was able to resume some overseas travel and in 1984 she married widower Bob Cooper, another scientist. In retirement she continued to research and write, publishing her book *Microalgae Microscopic Marvels* in 1996 and chapters as late as 2012. In 1997 she was awarded an MNZM and she has a number of algal taxa named after her.

The Dr Vivienne Cassie Cooper Award comprises \$5,000 over two years and enables women to return to study (full-time or part-time) having spent time since graduation caring for whanau or family members, or in the paid or voluntary workforce.



Dr Vivienne Cassie Cooper (on the right) with Karen Taylor, one of two inaugural recipients of the Award in 2018. The other recipient was Huiarau Stewart, who was unable to attend the awards ceremony.