Christine’s introduction:

When I first saw the Eileen Ramsay collection at the Mildura Arts Centre, I was inspired to create new works to celebrate Ramsay’s important contribution to Australian botany.

I was struck by the fragile beauty of Eileen’s specimen folio, held together with pink ribbon, and the care she had taken in assembling such a large collection.

With the help of local plant enthusiasts, Marion and Peter Lang, I went in search of the plants that I hoped might still be growing in the Murray River region.

Working from Eileen’s plant list, Marion and Peter helped me identify many of these plants still growing in their natural environment.

I felt as if we were following in Eileen Ramsay’s footsteps as we drove around the river flats, finding matches with her specimens and field notes.

It seemed appropriate to use the cyanotype process to document our findings. This process, originally used by Anna Atkins in the 1840s for botanical illustration, seemed the perfect way to combine the new with the old.

The ghost images of the plants against the blue background seemed to express something of a forgotten past brought into the focus of the present under the big blue dome of the sky.

Christine Johnson,

Mildura, October 2015.

Eileen Ramsey.

Eileen Ramsay was once described as “without doubt, the finest botanist in the north west [who] established quite a number of new records for the Mallee and Victoria”.

Indeed, Ramsay’s astonishing collection of botanical specimens – preciously encased in a series of annotated hand-labelled folders as if placed there yesterday instead of more than half a century ago – remains as much a tribute to her knowledge as her diligence. Soon, this collection will move from the Mildura Art Centre to the Melbourne Herbarium: a tribute to a true and doughty botanical pioneer.

Eileen Ramsay’s assiduous skills represented only part of her extraordinary story.

Of French-Mauritian and Australian background, Eileen Ramsay was also a significant writer of prose and poetry. She was local correspondent for the *Riverlander,* a good conversationalist, voracious reader and ardent dog-lover who never went anywhere (even to dine at The Grand Hotel, in Mildura) without her two hounds. She also loved hats – having a trunk jammed with more than 50 choice examples, including ones decorated with cherries, others with flowers. Her favourite was a long-feathered hat, called “Pinocchio”.

For all her bohemian ways, Eileen Ramsay’s life was tinged with sadness. After her two brothers, Tom and Dutchy, were killed at Gallipoli within a week of each other, Ramsay’s character would be marked by a melancholy streak. On Anzac Day, for example, she would retreat to the bush, well away from any ceremony.

Ramsay was born Eileen Couvé. Her father, a chemist in Dandenong, moved to Red Cliffs with his family in the mid-1920s to open a pharmacy and start a vineyard. Young Eileen immersed herself in civic affairs, including a term as president of the local women’s club. After the death of her parents, she married a Mr Ramsay, a water ganger, who took over the running of the vineyard.

Following her husband’s death, Ramsay, in 1949, became a founding member of the Field Naturalists Club, where she met John Plant, the “butterfly man”. They struck up an unlikely but lasting friendship.

Every weekend, the “short and very plump” Ramsay and the much-younger stick-like Plant would go bush in her old Chevrolet, one of the dogs draped across the back window ledge. She went off in search of new plants; he went in search of butterflies and beetles. They would meet for lunch (prepared by Plant’s mother: cooking was not one of Ramsay’s natural skills), and return to their respective jobs, until early evening. Often, Plant, a talented artist, made watercolours of the specimens collected by Ramsay.

Often, Ramsay was so intent on her work that she would lose her bearings. On one occasion, as night fell, she flagged down a car on the highway, only to find she had been walking in the wrong direction.

In time, Ramsay became frailer. After her entire grape crop and her garage were destroyed during a freak hail storm, she suffered rapid memory-loss. Against her will, she was transferred to a Melbourne hospital, where she died in November 1961.