

OBITUARY – JAMES BRUCE IRWIN
17 NOVEMBER 1921 – 4 JANUARY 2012

Bruce Irwin, who died in Tauranga aged 90, was regarded as one of this country's greatest botanical illustrators of native orchids and had the honour of having two named for him. Modest man that he was, he had mixed feelings about the naming of *Pterostylis irsoniana*, saying it wasn't the 'done thing'. He discovered several species himself.

Bruce was born in Wanganui, where his Irish Father was a men's outfitter and tailor. As a young teenager Bruce liked nothing better than to head off on his bicycle looking for native orchids to draw, something that was to become a life-long and all-consuming 'hobby' that included almost 12 years labour on 'The Oxford Book of New Zealand Plants', with Lucy Moore, still considered a landmark publication 34 years later. After leaving Wanganui Technical College, Bruce trained as a draughtsman with the Department of Lands and Survey in New Plymouth and relished the proximity of Mt Taranaki and its native orchids.

He was called up for pilot training late in WWII, going on to serve in Japan with J Force after the war. Then, after a stint with Lands and Survey in Wellington, Bruce bought a holiday camp in Marlborough Sounds and it was there he met renowned botanist Dr Lucy Moore, who gave him a microscope. 'I couldn't see the detail of the plant and understand how it worked' he recalled. 'I didn't intend to become interested in botany, it just happened.'

In 1967 Bruce became artist in charge of the art department at Otago University's Medical School, a job he described as 'the best in the world because he could get into the hills for days at a time' thus allowing him to work on 'The Oxford Book of New Zealand Plants'.

A life member of the NZ Native Orchid Group, Bruce moved to Tauranga in 1981, joining the BOP Orchid Society and becoming a foundation member of the Tauranga Orchid Society of which he became a Life Member in 1994. He designed

and helped build Tauranga's winning display stands for the National Shows from 1985 to 2010. Bruce was one of 'The Gang of Four' who originally established the orchid gardens at the Te Puna Quarry Park. He had also been involved with the Iwitahi Trust's work in Taupo for many years. In 1997 Bruce was awarded the John Easton Award by the Hawkes Bay Orchid Society.

Bruce became an early member of the Rotorua Botanical Society and attended many field trips, where his extensive knowledge of orchids was freely imparted to anyone who was interested. It was always memorable when Bruce came on a trip, as it was a great opportunity to increase our orchid knowledge. His involvement in many trips is reflected in the content of the 2007 book, 'Bruce Irwin's Drawings of New Zealand Orchids', published by the Native Orchid Group. A large number of the drawings in that book are from material sourced on Botanical Society trips.

Since the first issue of the Rotorua Botanical Society Newsletter, in May 1984, it has carried on its front and back cover illustrations kindly donated by Bruce. For the front cover he provided a selection of leaves, fruits and flowers of indigenous plants characteristic of the central North Island and for the back cover the flower of the minute subterranean parasite *Thismia rodwayi*. Bruce undertook this task at the same time he was working on the illustrations for the 'Vegetation of Egmont National Park' (1986), authored by the Society's first president (Bruce Clarkson).

Although 'known' for his work with orchids, Bruce had a wide knowledge of the New Zealand flora. In 2000, he was awarded the Allan Mere by the New Zealand Botanical Society, presented to an 'outstanding botanist'. He was a humble and polite man who always helped when asked and was never 'pushy' or assertive with his considerable knowledge.

Bruce is survived by a son, daughter, and five grand-daughters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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