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H.B. DOBBIE 1852-1940 - FERN ENTHUSIAST

J.D. McCraw

Dobbie's book, *Ferns of New Zealand*, is well-known although out of print, but little was known about the author. Thanks to the generosity of descendants in lending manuscripts and photographs some information about his life is now available.

Herbert Boucher Dobbie was born at Hayes, Middlesex in 1852. His mother was Ellen Locker, sister of the editor of the London *Graphic* and of the poet Frederick Locker. His father was a Major in the Madras Army but died on active service when Herbert was very young. His mother and her six children then returned to England and settled at Irthington near Brampton in Cumberland.

It was here that he developed his life-long interest in ferns. He served his apprenticeship with an engineering firm and worked at various jobs until he decided to emigrate to New Zealand in 1875.

He worked in an engineering firm in Auckland and then joined the Railways Department in 1877 as a fitter and later as a draughtsman.

1880 was an eventful year. He bought a house in Parnell, he married Charlotte Gilfillan, his sister Mary was murdered in Taranaki and he published his first book on New Zealand ferns.

This first book was a rather primitive affair and consisted of a number of pages with white silhouettes of ferns on a blue background and for this reason it is often referred to as the "Blue Book". The prints were made by placing dried ferns on glass with sensitised paper beneath and exposing the assemblage to light.

He moved to Whangarei in 1881 to take up the position of District Manager for the Railways Department. As the railway was only three miles long with few trains he was not overworked so bought land on the outskirts of the settlement and developed a large citrus orchard. He was the first and largest citrus grower in the district.

Fifteen years later he was transferred to Picton and then, after a row with the Department, to the workshops at Petone on demotion. He resigned after a few months and worked his passage to south Africa where he spent about a year working on railways there.

He returned to New Zealand in 1903 and settled in Auckland. He built a substantial house at 122 Market Road (which still stands) and took a job as a proof reader with the *Auckland Star*. It was at Market Road that he established his fernery and after he retired in 1916 he wrote his well known *Ferns of New Zealand* published in 1921. This book passed through several editions, the later ones updated and revised by Marguerite Crookes.

Dobbie still retained the Whangarei land and in 1910 he presented the Borough with a magnificent 44 hectare stand of native bush on the slopes of Parihaka mountain. This is now known as Dobbie Park. The orchard was subdivided during the 1920s and the final block with his house was sold in 1937 to the Crown and was used as the site for the first State houses in Whangarei. A street, "Wairere St", commemorates the name of Dobbie's orchard and, in fact, parallels the old driveway into the property.

Dobbie died in 1940 aged 88. He was survived by his wife, five daughters and one son. His youngest daughter, Beatrix was a well-known artist particularly as a painter of animals and as the illustrator of the book *Tutira* by Guthrie-Smith.

Dobbie comes through as a man of the times - a Victorian father and employer who left no one in doubt as to who was head of the family and orchard. He was hardworking, innovative and competent at his job but he liked to do things his own way and this led to strife with his various employers. He contributed to the communities in which he lived - he was a member of the town band in Whangarei and Picton, was member and Chairman of the One Tree Hill Road Board for many years and gave a large part of his land to the Borough of Whangarei.

His book *Ferns of New Zealand*, although written in a deliberately popular style, still fills the gap between the formal treatment of the *Flora of New Zealand Vol.I* and the large number of popular books on ferns that have appeared lately.

"Dobbie" still awaits a suitable replacement.