

Kathleen Wood: Botanist and Artist

Alan Esler

Kathleen Wood was born Kathleen May Fletcher in 1915 in Gisborne. Her father, a carpenter, married Annie Adelaide Oakley. They settled, with Kathleen and her brother Lionel, in a small villa in Glen Eden in 1922. On each side of the house were rough paddocks with gumdiggers' holes, and Waikumete cemetery was mostly gumland in the raw state. For a young girl keen on plants and "mad on drawing flowers" this was a heavenly spot. Gumland contained many species which are now more difficult to find, and she knew most of them.

Her first real experience of bush came when she explored Huia from a weekend bach her husband Tom had built. They met through the Auckland Tramping Club and lived at 19 Highland Rd, Mt Albert, from 1942. The club took them to many and distant places and they explored others in Tom's holidays from McEwen's furniture factory. Tom died in 1975 and she married Bill Mays, also of the tramping club, in 1977.

It was through the tramping club too that she met Margaret Simpson (later Bulfin) who opened new horizons for Kathleen (more often known as Kate or Katie). Margaret moved to Auckland after her horticultural training at Massey Agricultural College in 1947 and they shared interests in plants of many kinds. It was Margaret who introduced her to the staff of DSIR's Botany Division and widened her circle of botanical contacts. When a substation was established at Mt. Albert in 1970 Katie developed a close association with Sandra Astridge and Alan Esler.

All the while Katie advanced her artistic skills with pen and ink, water colours and oils and was active in the New Zealand Fellowship of Artists. Her paintings in many exhibitions won

acclaim and she sold about 200 pieces of her work. It was her pen and ink sketches with botanical articles that made her known outside Auckland wherever the Weekly News was read.

Her first venture into publishing is recorded on a certificate for a sketch submitted to the Boys and Girls Section of the New Zealand Herald dated 1937. Then followed poems and sketches in the New Zealand Mirror. The Auckland Tramping Club's *Wanderlust* magazine in 1951 printed her account of the lower Hollyford trip. Suburban newspapers from the early 1960s onwards reported Katie's talks to the Horticultural Society and garden clubs, and walks she guided.

A letter from the editor R. A. Anderson in 1979 heralded the end of her most significant contribution to botanical education. It said "By now you will have seen the announcement that the August issue is to be the last issue of the New Zealand Weekly News... I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your very excellent cooperation. Not only has your material been good but your adherence to dead-lines has been much appreciated. We are sad that our associations with the Weekly News has come to an end".

In the fourteen years between the first illustrated article and this announcement there were scores of others drawing attention to features of plant life as she saw them in the field. Some of the illustrations lived on to grace other people's articles in other publications. The volume of correspondence she received was a measure of the impact of her articles on a public starved of the botanical references



Kathleen Wood 1984. Photo: Valerie Lovis.

available to us now. Joining the Auckland Botanical Society in the 1950s brought Katie into contact with many other enthusiasts and some experts in various fields. She remembers extending her knowledge of ferns on field trips with Marguerite Crookes and Arthur Mead, learning some more fungi from Joan Dingley, and orchids from Dan Hatch's publications. The Botanical Society published many of her articles in the 1950 – 1988 period.

By 1949 Lucy Cranwell's *Botany of Auckland* was getting out of date because the vegetation was changing. Willing members of the Botanical Society chose, or were allocated, sections of the region to give the full botanical treatment. Katie, working in the Huia area (Kakamatua to Little Huia), produced a list of plants with good voucher specimens. The Auckland Museum herbarium bears evidence of her painstaking work with over 1000 specimens from there and elsewhere.

The quest for correct names of plants took her to Robert Cooper, the botanist at Auckland Museum. It was not long before she volunteered to help him with preparation of herbarium specimens, enlisting the enthusiasm of Phyllis Hines at the same time. They were designated associate botanists – Katie Hynes from 1950 to 1955, and Phyllis for a longer period. For two years they kept the Botany Department running while the botanist was overseas. Together they had a major part in preparing the annual Cheeseman Memorial Show that continued to exhibit New Zealand native plants from the late 1930s in Lucy Cranwell's time to the 1960s.

Although not a researcher herself, Katie helped professionals if only to supply specimens for their studies and draw attention to her observations. For example, she remembers particularly collecting *Schizaea dichotoma* at all stages of development for John Lovis in England with whom the Woods developed a close friendship.

On the 1950-1951 Hollyford trip she spied an unusual fern which years later Barbara Parris confirmed as the intergeneric hybrid between *Ctenopteris heterophylla* and *Grammitis billardierei*. In April 1960 a fungus she found on top of Mt. Parahaki in Whangarei was confirmed by Joan Dingley as *Mutinus borneensis*, a first New Zealand record for this species. We salute this happy and healthy 84 year old for the knowledge and joy she has brought to us over a very long period.



Some Strange Ground Orchids

By KATHLEEN WOOD

Searching for ground orchids can be fun and once bitten by the bug one can become quite an enthusiast. Almost any patch of bush or second growth can prove a happy hunting ground.

Although our native orchids are small and cannot compare with their more exotic cousins, there is a thrill to be had in finding the many different species that appear at various seasons of the year.

Among these are the Corybas or spider orchids, which usually have a single leaf, round or triangular shaped, according to species, and purple hooded flowers with sepals elongating into hair-like segments resembling spider's legs.

Also plentiful and for the sharp eyed are the mosquito orchids, *Acianthus*, which have almost transparent pink or green flowers resembling the wings of the insects from which they are named. These like to grow amid the debris beneath kauri trees. There, too, grow some of the smaller species of *Pterostylis*, or striped greenhoods. These elfin plants secrete a quaint trigger-like mechanism designed for capturing and releasing insects so that the flowers can be pollinated.

Pink or white flowered *Caladenias* follow into the summer. Then come the colourful *Thelymitras*, or sun orchids.

These and the brown and gold flowered spidery *Maikaika*, *Orthocerus strictum* have bulbs which are edible and are often called Maori potatoes. In early days, quaint magical uses were attributed to the bulbs. Fat ones eaten together were believed to seal love between young people and old withered bulbs brought hate.