

Betty E. G. Molesworth Allen, OBE, 1913-2002

Ewen K. Cameron



Fig. 1. Betty Molesworth Allen.
The Times, London, 31 Oct 2002.

Betty Eleanor Gossèt Molesworth Allen (née Molesworth) (Fig. 1 & 2), or BEGM as she often signed the Auckland Museum herbarium labels, was possibly the last living founding member of the Auckland Botanical Society (ABS), its first secretary (1937-38) (Beever 1987), and a member until 1972. She published one ABS bulletin, on Auckland Salt Marshes, and 4 articles in the ABS *Newsletter* (1945 & 47) before going overseas. From 1949 to 1965 she published another 11 articles in the *Newsletter* covering many places she visited while traveling or living overseas: Isles of Scilly, Sark (Channel Is), Africa, and Malaysia including Kedah Peak and Mt Kinabalu.

Betty was born in Opotiki in 1913 and as a child suffered ill-health. She "spent more of her first twenty years in hospital than out of it and today insists that TB, polio and cancer have made her remarkably tough in later life" (Anon. 1995). Betty began working part-time in the herbarium at the Auckland Museum in the 1930s, working for Lucy Cranwell (1907-2000) on projects such as mounting the original Banks and Solander specimens collected during Cook's first voyage to New Zealand (Thomson 2002). Lucy was an inspiration for Betty and stimulated her love for botany. At the end of 1938 (or early 1939) she moved to Dunedin to study taxonomic botany at the University of New Zealand. "Her new mentor, the Rev Professor J. Holloway [1881-1945], shaped her both spiritually and scientifically; she

became a regular member of his congregation and an eager disciple of his researches into ferns and their allies. His investigation into the lifecycle of *Psilotum nudum* inspired her in particular, paving the way for her startling discovery in Spain three decades later" (Anon. 2002).

Soon after the outbreak of WWII, Betty volunteered for the Women's Auxillary Air Force, bluffing her way through the medical (Anon. 2002). After the war, she returned to the Auckland Museum as botanist (1944-47), replacing Lucy Cranwell who had married and departed for the USA. Betty also revived her involvement with ABS.

While Betty was associated with the Museum she collected over 1070 plant specimens, mainly mosses (c.600) from Jan 1938 (Piha) to Nov 1947 (David Island [Rocks], The Noises). The collections range from Whangaruru in the north, to Otago, but mainly came from the Waitakere Ranges (especially Piha and Tiritangi) and Hunua Ranges. She made a large collection (130 specimens, mainly mosses) from Little Barrier Island in Oct 1945. Following in the two Lucys (Cranwell and Moore) footsteps many were collected from North Island mountain tops: Te Aroha (1939), Kohukohunui (1939-44), Pirongia (1940 & 45), Tarawera (1945), and Taranaki (1946). Although she became famous for discovering *Psilotum nudum* in Europe (southern Spain), and collected ferns widely in Malaysia, she only collected 39 ferns and fern allies while in New Zealand. She also collected jointly at two localities: algae at Anawhata with Lucy Moore in Oct 1944 and flowering plants with Arnold Wall in the Craigieburn Ranges in Jan 1947.



Fig. 2. A boat of botanists. Left to right: Beatrice Ashcroft (Botany demonstrator at Auckland University College), Betty Molesworth, Lucy Moore and H.H. Allan en route to The Noises Islands. Photo probably by Laurie Millener, late 1930s.

She kept in touch with many of her early Auckland botanical friends, including Lucy Cranwell and Joan Dingley. In the early 1940s Joan Dingley (pers. comm.) used to go out and botanise with Betty in the Waitakere Ranges in Betty's old Austin car. Titirangi was being subdivided at that time and it was easy going in the bush along the surveyor's cut lines. Betty's largest herbarium collections in AK come from Titirangi, where her mother lived, and Piha where she stayed weekends with her father who resided there (J. Dingley pers. comm.). She was the last to collect the threatened *Pimelea* from Piha (Fig. 3).

After New Zealand - mainly summarised from Thomson (2002) and Anon. (2002)

Betty left New Zealand at the end of 1947 intending to utilize a 2-year bursary from Basle University to study the flora of the Pacific islands, culminating in fieldwork on New Caledonia. To gain knowledge in tropical botany she planned a 3-month crash course in Malaysian botany, but within a year she met and married Geoffrey Allen, a fighter pilot and amateur ornithologist. She never reached Basle. Over the next

15 years, with her husband, Betty had a series of expeditions in the remote rainforests of Borneo, Thailand and Malaysia, which allowed her to collect plants (especially ferns) while he studied the bird life. When not in the field she worked in the Singapore herbarium where her interest in ferns flourished under the garden's director and fern expert, R.E. Holttum (1895-1990). Singapore, Smithsonian and Kew herbaria all benefited from her tropical fern collecting.

In 1963 the Allens retired to Los Barrios in southern Spain where they both continued with their natural history interests. This is where Betty discovered *Psilotum*, a new record for Europe. Her husband died in 1989 (Thomson 2002) or 1985 (Anon. 2002). Geoff Davidson visited Betty in Spain in 1998 (see Davidson 1999).

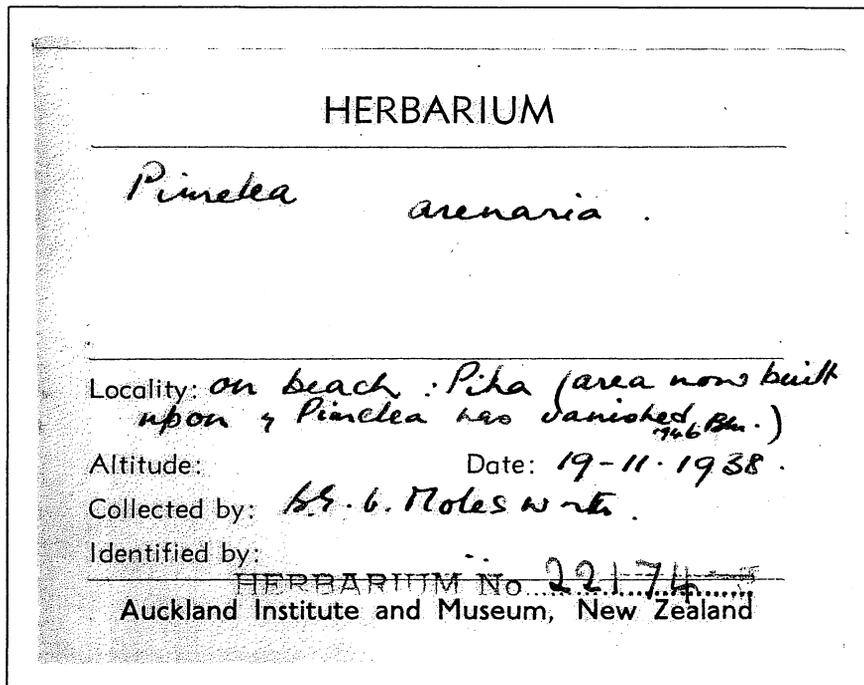
Betty's many publications have been mainly in the form of popular books and field guides, especially about the region in Spain to which she retired. Thomson (2002) lists these in full. She died in Marbella, Spain, 11 October 2002. She had no children, but two ferns are named after her.

Awards

- 1988 Honorary daughter of Los Barrios
- 1995 Bloomer Award of the Linnean Society of London
- 1998 OBE

Acknowledgements

Joan Dingley for personal information on Betty, for providing figure 2, and for forwarding the Obituary from *The Times*.



References

- Anon. 1995: H H Bloomer Award for Zoology [Botany]. *The Linnean* 11(2): 35.
- Anon. 2002: Obituaries, Betty Molesworth Allen. *The Times*, London. 31 Oct 2002.
- Beever, Jim. 1987: Fifty years on. *Auckland Botanical Society Newsletter* 42(2): 36-41.
- Davidson, G. 1999: A serendipitous series of coincidences. *Auckland Botanical Society Journal* 54(1): 30-31.
- Thomson, A.D. 2002; Notable New Zealand women botanists: Betty Molesworth Allen. *NZ Botanical Society Newsletter* 67: 21-22.

Fig. 3. Betty Molesworth's herbarium label of the threatened plant *Pimelea arenaria* "on beach: Piha" collected by her in Nov 1938 (AK 22174). This appears to be the 2nd-to-last collection of this species in the Auckland region (cf. AKU 3489). In 1946 she annotated the specimen "(area now built upon and *Pimelea* has vanished)".

