

PUZZLE OF THE BEECHESMrs K. WOOD

Visiting Tongariro National Park in March this year I could not help noticing that the bush in the Chateau was becoming unsightly. This was owing to the dead and dying beech trees, Nothofagus solandri (black beech) which raised their stark heads or lay broken and strewn on the ground. Apart from the beeches the rest of the forest trees seemed green and healthy enough, perhaps thriving because the loss of the canopy has allowed the sun and light to penetrate and encourage their growth.

At the National Park headquarters I asked if the reason was known why the beech trees were dying. I was told by a young woman that this had not been properly studied. She advanced the theory that about fifteen years ago a very severe winter had weakened the trees and they had become prey to insect damage and fungus.

Personally I wondered if the opposite could be the case. New Zealand is passing through a cycle of warmer temperatures and proof of this is in the melting of the great South Island glaciers. Beech being a sub antarctic tree should prefer cold to warmth and perhaps the warm dry summers have had an adverse effect. Over at Mt Egmont the chief forest trees are rimu, rata and kamahi, and beeches are absent. Could the Ruapehu forest be going through a transitional stage and imitating its neighbour? This could make a fascinating study indeed as there are many questions to be answered.

Strangely enough over at Mt Pihanga by Lake Roto-aira one does not see all these dead and dying beech trees. While on the walk round Lake Rotopounamu on the slopes of Mt Pihanga many large and healthy red beeches, Nothofagus fusca are to be seen among the rimus and other giant forest trees. We met a ranger on the track and he agreed that although black beeches are dying, red beeches are "holding their own".

My most interesting botanical find on this trip was a fair abundance of the finely fronded parsley fern, Botrychium australe var. millefolium growing beside a track on the te Pounamu road which crosses the Pihanga saddle between Turangi and National Park. This fern looks rather like a giant moss and is most attractive.

IPOMOEA PALMATA AT OPOTIKIM. HEGINBOTHAM

My search for "new" plants to record in the 'Opotiki District Wild Plants Survey' led to an interesting discovery. A friend of mine, exercising his sons dogs along Hukuwai beach a few miles from Opotiki township noticed an unusual mauve flowered vine growing in the sandhills. He brought a few leaves and a withered flower to me for an opinion as to its identity, and thus in April this year was discovered