



Photo: Lovell Smith

NORMAN LASCELLES ELDER 1896-1974

Science Gallery of *Nature Heritage* No. 94 (1976) features Norman Elder, and Michael Greenwood has written a comprehensive obituary for the *N.Z. Journal of Botany* Vol. 14 (3) (1976). This account emphasises aspects of his life which are of particular interest to the Society.

Norman was brought up at Waimahoe Bush Station, Waikanae (now "Te Rama") on a farm cleared of bush by his father. So, as he grew up, he was closely associated with native forest and its modification by man, and undoubtedly this had a great influence on his later life style. Bush picnics and excursions were popular, and at 16 he climbed to the summit of Kapakapanui which gave him a basis for comparison on later visits.

Educated for the most part at Wanganui Collegiate School, Norman stayed on an extra year until in 1916 he was old enough to go to World War I. He was twice wounded in the same leg, and it was during his convalescence in Britain that he took up botany to occupy his time. In 1919 he returned to New Zealand briefly before studying electrical engineering at Cambridge (King's College).

He and his cousin, Kathleen Montresor Elder, were married in 1927, and Norman came out ahead to find employment. He worked for N.Z. Railways on the Otira and Lyttelton tunnels, and the early surveys for electrification of the Hutt Valley. Based in Wellington, he came under the influence of that pioneer in plant ecology, Leonard Cockayne, and gained a new perspective on things botanical. His tramping forays in the Tararuas produced information on the vegetation which he contributed to that classic paper with V. D. Zotov, A. D. Beddie, G. O. K. Sainsbury and E. A. Hodgson, "An outline of the vegetation and flora of the Tararua Mountains" (*Trans.R.Soc.N.Z.* 68:259-324, 1938). His other great interest was mapping, and in 1932 his trampers' map of the Tararuas was published.

In 1931 Norman went off to Havelock North and taught at Hereworth Preparatory School for over 20 years, a circumstance which opened up new horizons for botanising and mapping. His main papers (all published in the *Transactions*) resulting from these years are: "Vegetation of the Kaweka Range" (1959); "Vegetation of the Kaimanawa Range" (1962); and "Vegetation of the Ruahine Range" (1965). The relevant maps, brought out under the name of the Heretaunga Tramping Club (which he was largely instrumental in founding), became the basis for the present-day maps of Lands and Survey and the N.Z. Forest Service. He had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1938.

Botanising and mapping trips took Norman Elder far and wide in the ranges, and he brought back plants and grew them at Havelock

North, recording their growth and diversity, e.g. "The glaucous hebe of the Inland Patea" (*Trans.R.Soc.N.Z.* 69 (3), 1959). In 1954 he was awarded the Loder Cup which is inscribed, "Offered to lovers of nature in New Zealand to encourage the protection and cultivation of the incomparable flora of the Dominion". Of equal importance in earning the award* was Norman's influence in introducing young people to the joys of the hills and the fascinating patterns of vegetative cover found there. His students include well-known professional biologists (including A. P. Druce), who could be said to carry on the Elder tradition.

In Hawke's Bay Norman Elder had a unique position—he was unquestionably "Mr Back Country", and constantly consulted. For him there was no generation gap or any other; he was as courteous and at ease with the local four-year-old as with any dignitary. Generations of HTC trampers will have seen him on the back of the homeward-bound truck, blue-checked head scarf flying, eyes sparkling, gaily leading the tramping songs. Sometimes this was in the small hours of Monday morning because Norman had been somewhat over-enthusiastic in his botanising.

After retiring from teaching, Norman worked for several years (until compulsory retirement) as an ecologist for the N.Z. Forest Service, particularly on the ecological survey of the central North Island ranges. This was led by P. J. McKelvey, now Professor of Forestry at the University of Canterbury, and included accompanying and tutoring members of the annual student work force. During these years he wrote many ecological reports which were not published; these are being listed by the N.Z. Forest Service so that they will be available for workers in the future. The twice-wounded leg, which was expected to disable him permanently, carried him over the back country until he was nearly 70. Then when his field work came to an end, he presented his botanical diaries (meticulously kept) and herbarium specimens to Botany Division, D.S.I.R.

Norman Elder was a handsome man, of fine physique, and with immense charm; and so modest that in discussion he would virtually apologise for being right. In 1971 he was made an Honorary Life Member of the N.Z. Ecological Society, which he always considered a joint award with Kath. She was an able botanist and trampster and up until her death in 1963 had given utmost support to him in all his fields of activity.

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* see citation in "The History of the Loder Cup", Loder Cup Committee, 1960