

W. F. Howlett

Pioneer Ruahine Botanist

J. F. Findlay, Makotuku

Kirk's *Students Flora*, 1899, describes *Aciphylla squarrosa* var. *flaccida* from specimens collected by Howlett on the Ruahine Range: "Smaller and more slender. Leaves softer, three pinnate; sheaths broader, sometimes two inches wide or more; segments narrower, more crowded. Bracts spreading, never refracted."

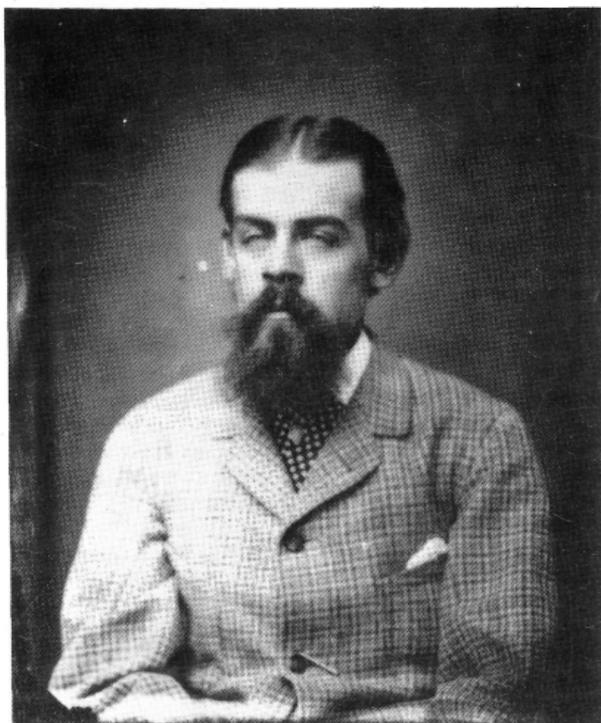
The type locality for *A. squarrosa* was Totaranui, Queen Charlotte Sound. *A. squarrosa* is now regarded as a coastal species restricted to the shores of Cook Strait, with distinct local varieties found in the Tararuas and on the central volcanic plateau. The Ruahine plant, once regarded as a fourth variety of *A. squarrosa*, now appears to be a distinct unnamed local endemic species.

While engaged in an extensive botanical survey of the Ruahine Range in 1941, Elder, Greenwood and Druce were familiar with the Howlett herbarium specimen from which Kirk's description was written. The exact locality of the colony was not recorded with the specimen, but "Howlett country" at the head of the Oroua river appeared to offer a clue. After an exhaustive search the plant was rediscovered in one locality only, an alpine tributary basin of the Oroua river; across the gorge, almost opposite, and at approximately the same altitude as the present Howlett's hut. Here it still grows in fair numbers. For the purpose of obtaining live plants for further taxonomic studies, Tony Druce and myself revisited the *A. squarrosa* var. *flaccida* colony in April 1979.

Howlett's hut is a very old landmark in the Ruahines. Could it have been built by the original Howlett sometime before the turn of the century? About Howlett himself even less information was available, and it appeared desirable to define his status as a botanist. As memories fade, and first-hand sources of information pass away, it is often the case that only "romantic" trivia survive. So it has been with Howlett. Old trampers and local Makaretu identities tell of Howlett marrying a young girl, carrying her on his back up the Tukituki river, to a honeymoon at his hut high in the Ruahine Ranges.

The present Howlett's hut was built in 1940 by the Ruahine Tramping Club with much help from other clubs. Its ownership passed to the Manawatu Tramping Club, and more recently to the Heretaunga Tramping Club. Earlier this year this latter club renovated and substantially enlarged the hut. Heretaunga Tramping Club's interest in Howlett further stimulated research.

The son of an English clergyman, William Frederick Howlett was born at Torquay, England, in 1850. He was educated at Clifton



and Marlborough Colleges, later proceeding to Oxford where he graduated as a B.A. After emigrating to New Zealand, his first appointment was as third master at Nelson College, where he is recorded as holding an M.A. degree and serving on the staff during 1876-77. There is no record of Howlett botanizing in Nelson. One may perhaps conjecture that if he had made the acquaintance of the Nelson mountains and their fascinating flora the Ruahine *Aciphylla* might have remained undiscovered for a further sixty years.

Moving to Hawke's Bay in 1883, Howlett became a back-country schoolteacher at Makaretu, close to the foothills of the central Ruahine Range. A contemporary account records: "The teacher, Mr Howlett, made his pupils acquainted with all the most important trees in the bush, and trained them in the care of garden plots."

While employed as the schoolteacher, Howlett supplemented his income with a remittance from England, and also kept a store opposite the school. He is remembered as being very independent, and he opened the store when it suited him. A list of debtors was

sometimes pinned on the door.

Following a dispute with the local school committee over the disciplining of a pupil, Howlett resigned in 1886. Howlett had apparently treated the board and committee with contempt, and had brought them into ridicule by letters in the paper. Correspondence on this matter had apparently caused great amusement at the board meeting owing to the quaint manner in which Mr Howlett described the affair.

Apparently a man of parts, he transferred his activities at least temporarily to Pahiatua, where he was a storekeeper, commission agent, and later the proprietor of an accommodation house at Makuri. However, the call of the Ruahines proved too strong, and it was not long before he was back at Makaretu.

Active as a journalist, Howlett contributed regular columns under various pseudonyms to newspapers in Hawke's Bay and Pahiatua, as well as numerous letters to the editor under his own name. Scrapbooks of these clippings attributed to Howlett survive in the Alexander Turnbull Library. These cover a diversity of topics. Politics, local body affairs and domestic Makaretu events are described. Public services such as railways, post office and education, receive more than adequate criticism in his columns. Nor does the scientific "establishment" escape unscathed. Writing in his column "Olla Podrida" he describes Dr Hutton as "an ignorant old humbug". Even allowing for the quaint archaic style of the day, much of Howlett's writing appears slightly paranoid and not infrequently defamatory.

No books were published. Apart from his contributed newspaper columns, the only other surviving Howlett writings are the poem *Coronation Day* and *Tirenics*, an essay advocating zero population growth and restricted immigration as the solution to New Zealand's social and economic problems. Perhaps some of our modern-day politicians have been secretly studying this long forgotten work!

To the modern reader much of "Olla Podrida" comes through as a lot of pedestrian rubbish, but interspersed with his general topics are columns describing his activities in the Ruahines. Howlett made staging camps in the Tukituki headwaters including a slab hut at the Tukituki forks opposite the foot of Daphne Spur. This latter hut was destroyed by a falling tree in 1940.

In 1893 Howlett eventually completed the construction of his summer camp on the main Oroua-Tukituki watershed ridge at 4,000 feet on the site of the present Howlett's hut. The hut was strongly built of split cedar slabs from trees growing close to the site. It was roofed with shingles which were split and carried up from lower altitudes. The skilled services of a local bushman-carpenter were employed by Howlett for these tasks.

Howlett bestowed the name Daphne hut on his summer camp

and the steep ridge leading to the divide was known as Daphne Ridge. Confusion has been caused by N.Z. Forest Service officially applying the name "Daphne" to a modern hut in the Tukituki Valley near the foot of Daphne Spur. This latter hut would be close to the site of Howlett's slab hut at the foot of the Daphne Spur.

Pimelea buxifolia, abundant in the central Ruahines, supplied the inspiration for Howlett's choice of the name "Daphne", and it is necessary to refute some legends pertaining to this matter. The name did not originate from his wife's Christian name. One trampler's legend would have us believe that "Daphne" originated from the finding of an old cardboard wrapper marked "Daphne Dates" on the Daphne Spur!

Round about the turn of the century the Rabbit Board built a malthoid hut close to Daphne hut.

Howlett employed local shepherds to pack stores and liquor to Daphne hut. He was regarded as a bit of a hermit, and apparently spent long periods alone in the ranges, but he was not always without companions.

The late Mr Stenberg, in a talk to Ruahine Tramping Club in 1938, described how he acted as a young paid assistant to Howlett, packing stores to the hut, and accompanying him on many trips along the tops. They ascended most of the peaks and explored the headwaters of the Pohangina, Oroua and Waipawa catchments. Many of these journeys are described in Howlett's writings.

Howlett deplored the unavailability of maps orienting Hawke's Bay settlement with the pioneering villages on the western side of



Howlett's hut 1942, on the site of the original Daphne hut.

the ranges. In a letter to a Feilding newspaper he seeks to make contact with men of the Apiti district who might be interested in meeting him on the crest of the range. Giving the latitude and longitude of his summer camp, he states that although the main objects of his journeys are scientific, he is also interested in cutting tracks and making a route across the Ruahine range. Apparently the letter did not go unheeded. The H.B. "Evening News" of April 21, 1894, gives an account of a west to east crossing of the Ruahines. Howlett travelled by train to Feilding and by coach to Birmingham (now known as Kimbolton). Meeting a Mr A. K. Oldham, they travelled to the bush edge somewhere behind Apiti. They climbed to the crest of the Ngamoko range by a route somewhere near the present day Short's track, and then travelled north to the junction with the main divide at Otumore. Descending to the Pohangina-Tukituki saddle, the pair travelled north to Howlett's camp at the Tukituki forks and so out to Makaretu.

Howlett succeeded in drumming-up some local interest in tramping. A letter to the editor of "H.B. Evening News" reads: "Sir — In March 1893, I started a sort of Alpine Club, the idea being to make the headwaters of the Tukituki accessible. The objects of so doing were (1) recreation, (2) investigation of alpine flora, (3) prospecting for minerals, (4) making a stock track or road over into the Oroua basin." "Napier Evening News" of 30/3/1894 published a long article describing the first ascent of Parke's Peak (now Tiraha), by ladies. If Howlett and his small group of local enthusiasts can in fact be described as a tramping club, it must surely have been one of the first tramping clubs in New Zealand. The N.Z. Alpine Club was founded in 1892 and the Tararua Tramping Club in 1919.

As a biologist Howlett was well informed and had an extensive library. The late Mr Stenberg stated that he could provide scientific and popular names for most of the plants they met with in the Ruahines. He collected extensively and corresponded with Kirk, Colenso and Cockayne. The Colenso herbarium at the National Museum contains the type specimen of *Podocarpus montana* Colenso, collected by Howlett. (This is now regarded as a synonym of *P. nivalis* Hooker.) More specimens collected by Howlett were sent to Thomas Kirk, including the type specimens of *Aciphylla squarrosa* var. *flaccida*.

There is no record of Howlett writing in any of the scientific journals.

Commercial opportunities were not neglected. He exported fern spores at high prices to England. A letter to a H.B. paper is really an advertisement in which he offers to sell and dispatch native plants from the Ruahines to possible buyers in Napier.

In 1902 Howlett married Olive Helen Suisted of Tane, near Eketahuna. The bride was aged 21 years — not 16 years as local

legend would have us believe. There were no children. The honeymoon was spent at Daphne hut, and on the journey up the Tukituki river a local man was employed to carry the bride across the numerous fords.

Surviving accounts describe Howlett as definitely eccentric and a real character, who appears to have been not lacking in vices. Matrimony does not appear to have unduly curtailed his activities either in the mountains, or indeed in the field of human relationships.

He was most active in mountaineering and botanizing from 1889 to 1906. At this time he left the Makaretu district for Pahiatua. He appears to have resumed school teaching for a time but return visits to Makaretu took place at intervals up to about 1918.

There is no record of Howlett botanizing in areas other than the Ruahines. After he gave up mountaineering about 1906 the old Daphne hut gradually fell into disrepair. When Howlett's hut was built on the site, only the piles of the old Daphne hut remained.

Howlett died in Wellington at the age of 85 in 1935.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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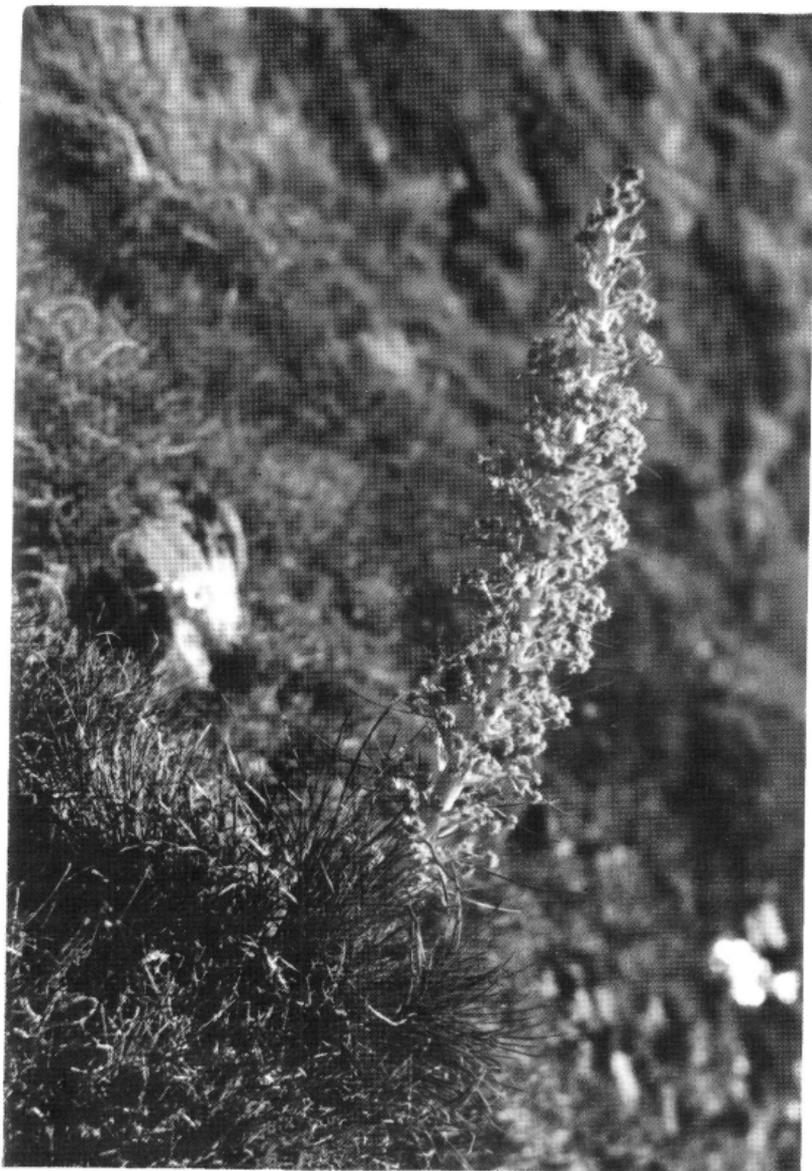
The Pahiatua Star 20/6/1895 — under pseudonym “Pablo”.



Head of the Oroua catchment and the eastern faces of Tiraha. The type locality of *Aciphylla squarrosa* var. *flaccida* is the small valley with a waterfall, left centre.



Type locality of *Aciphylla squarrosa* var. *flaccida*, c.1 km due South of Tiraha. Photo: A. P. Druce



Aciphylla squarrosa var. *flaccida* in the type locality, January 1952. Photo: A. P. Druee