

ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE YEARS OLD

John Thompson

I have spent a little time browsing through the Editor's copy of G.M. Thompson's 'The Fern and Fern Allies of New Zealand'.

Dated 1882 it was published only fourteen years after his arrival in New Zealand. The book highlights the wide knowledge of New Zealand plants botanists acquired in the early days of the settlement of New Zealand. As one reads the book one is continually surprised that so much was learnt in such a comparatively short time

The author describes 129 species of ferns and 16 fern allies. A botanical description of each species is given together with keys which help the reader to separate the species of each genus. Details of where each fern can be found in New Zealand and from what overseas country it has been recorded is provided, together with information on the situation, the kind of country, and the altitudes at which it grows. As well, notes on cultivation in the garden and other interesting facts are given. The notes on *Trichomanes reniforme*, the kidney fern, are an example.

'Distribution - Eastern Australia and the Chatham Islands. In New Zealand it is common in the North Island from the Bay of Islands to Wellington, and ranging from sea level to nearly 3000 ft (914 m). Abundant in the South Island along the whole West Coast as far as the Bluff, but quite absent in the eastern part of Otago, and very rare from the Waitaki northwards. This is one of the most singular ferns known, and is an extremely beautiful plant. The profusion in which it grows in the damp bush of the Sounds of the W. Coast of Otago is remarkable; it covers square miles of ground, and gives quite a characteristic appearance to the undergrowth. It is not a difficult fern to cultivate if it gets a sufficiently humid atmosphere, abundance of water to its roots, and rapid drainage; and with those requisites, will thrive in any soil that contains a fair share of vegetable mould, and is sufficiently light. Yet, probably, more failures are made with this, than any other fern, by inexperienced cultivators.'

Commenting on the necessity to use technical language in writing the descriptive part of the work the author states, 'If any are afraid to enter upon the study of our ferns because there are some apparently hard names to be got over, we would advise such persons to turn their attention to something else. If the subject is worth studying, no one need grudge taking a little trouble about it.'

The final chapter includes much information on how to collect and press ferns, on growing ferns in the garden, on how to construct a fernery, and on growing

ferns in pots in the house. One paragraph I found revealing, 'For a hundred persons in the colony who make collections of dried ferns, it would be difficult to find one who goes in for cultivation of the living plants. The taste has not sprung up yet, ...'

Later taxonomists have made some changes in the naming of the ferns. Of the 129 species recorded 36 have had a specific name change, 8 of the 33 generic names have been changed, and 16 individual ferns transferred to a different genus.

G.M. Thompson comments on page 20, that acquiring a correct knowledge of these interesting and beautiful plants 'requires the use of a good pocket lens, or, still better, of a simple dissecting microscope. Pocket lenses of all kinds are to be had, and at all prices, from one shilling to thirty; ... They can be carried in the waistcoat pocket attached to a thin silk or other cord, as from their small size they are apt to be lost when one is out scrambling after ferns. For examination of these plants at home, there is nothing equal to a dissecting microscope, and they can be had of very various make and price. Thus Mr Browning[#] advertises a cheap and useful instrument, "The Houston Microscope," furnished with three glasses and a pair of forceps, all for the modest sum of 6s. 6d. An excellent instrument is Swift's* "Convenient Dissecting Microscope," with a circular glass top, and costing £2. Of more expensive instruments suitable for every description of dissecting work, I would instance Beck's[†] (price £5 10s., without accessory apparatus), and Swift's portable (price £6 10s.), the last a most convenient instrument for the traveller.'

The author hopes that the book will meet the demand for a 'compendious and handy description of the Ferns of New Zealand'. I have no means of knowing if this book was popular and met that demand, but note, that in 1890 only eight years later, H.C. Field published his book, 'The Ferns of New Zealand and its Immediate Dependencies.' Willis, Wanganui.

[#] Mr J. Browning, 63 Strand, W.C.

* Messrs James Swift and Sons, 43 University-Street, London, W.C.

[†] Messrs R. and J. Beck, 31 Cornhill, E.C.