

NEROLI O'BRIEN: AN APPRECIATION OF A KEEN AMATEUR BOTANIST

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Neroli O'Brien, a cheerful, pleasant person and a very enthusiastic member of the Canterbury Botanical Society, who passed away on 14 October 1995, was born and brought up on a farm near Oxford. From a tender age she showed signs of becoming a very keen gardener. Gardening was one of her greatest joys and to walk with Neroli around the O'Brien's garden was a delight as she discussed each plant, complete with its botanical name. Neil and Neroli's garden was composed mainly of native plants, beautifully set out in natural settings, despite the urban location.

Neroli and Neil became aware and appreciative of native trees and plants when farming at Matawai, near Gisborne, where there was much native bush. However, it was not until they joined the Canterbury Botanical Society about 1976/7 that Neroli was transformed into "Neroli the botanist". They became members of the Society after a caution from Ross Elder, who said "come along to our meetings a couple of times and if we like you and you like us, then join". This they did and the Society has been much enriched by their membership.

From the beginning Neroli gave the Society all the energy and dedication that was characteristic of her spirit. Though she did not become a member of the executive her contribution, otherwise, was immense and immeasurable, especially giving encouragement to, and inspiring enthusiasm in, and passing on her knowledge to, others in the field. Neroli had a very kindly manner of inspiring confidence in the diffident and the novice. She was a natural teacher. She had a great fund of plant knowledge, and always retained a bubbling enthusiasm, which was very endearing.

She played an important role in the running of field camps, yet because of her quiet, unobtrusive approach, very few, possibly not even the organisers themselves, would be aware of her work in the kitchen.

In the field of botany Neroli's specialty was the ferns, especially the filmy ferns to which she graduated after attending a Botanical Society seminar. Many will recall her joy in discovering delights such as *Botrychium biforme* (var.) near Big Bay and *Botrychium australis* during one of the Hanmer weekend field trips. Her botanising was not confined to Botanical Society trips as members of the Over Forties Tramping Club can affirm. I remember her joy when she came across *Blechnum nigrum* on one of their trips.

A keen student, Neroli was constantly improving her understanding of botany by attending seminars, workshops, field trips and camps. Not only did she take active part in our BotSoc workshops; she also participated in summer schools run by Otago University at Borland Lodge and Dusky Sound. After field trips Neroli would consolidate her newly acquired knowledge by much study of the botanical library that she and Neil had carefully built up.

Murray Parsons said recently in an in-house Journal that Neroli “was a true friend of The Friends of the Herbarium which she joined in January 1988, helping with the mounting of specimens and the exchange of replicate specimens with overseas herbaria. There she, with her quiet support, her cheery smiles and her eagerness to share with us stories of the travels she and Neil had in recent years, has been morale boosting, enabling the “Team” of Friends and Staff to maintain their effectiveness and efficiency”. Murray had estimated, using one of the models suggested by Marilyn Waring, Neroli’s financial contribution of some 2053 hours to the Herbarium to be in the order of \$32,500. Of course, Neroli would never ever had thought of her contribution in financial terms. Tuesday was a “sacred day” as far as Neroli was concerned and nothing was allowed to get in the way of “her day” at the Herbarium. This is an illustration of her dedication to botany.

Neroli’s enthusiasm for botany was not confined to our Society, but was also shared with the members of the Canterbury Herb Society where her botanical knowledge and travel talks were much appreciated. To them she brought and shared not only her botanical skills, but also her artistic talents. Through her efforts specimens from herbs imported by Mrs Avice Hill in the 1950’s and still growing in the original garden in the Avice Hill Craft Centre are preserved in the Herbarium at Lincoln.

In more recent years Neroli, at first as co-author (three articles), then on her own (one article), wrote contributions for the Journal. She also contributed various notes for the Newsletter. one of her last Society trips was weed-pulling at Sawmill Road Bush, Staveley and she helped compile checklists for several forest areas at Totty’s farm and elsewhere in the same locality, in 1995. Neroli’s fascination with alpine plants led her to explore many high country habitats with Anne Adams and Neil, in search of rare and unusual species.

Neroli was a very fine amateur botanist and will be much missed by her friends of the Botanical Society, the Herbarium, the Herb Society, and other kindred groups.

To Neil and family we extend our sincere sympathy.