

THE ROSS AND YVONNE ELDER STORY

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Canterbury Botanical Society has depended on the botanical knowledge, wisdom, kindness, good humour and hard work of Ross and Yvonne Elder for more than three decades, so it came as a sad blow when Ross passed away, in September 1996, at the age of 83. Earlier in the year the Society had awarded the Senior Bledisloe Trophy to the Elders for their major contributions to Canterbury botany.

How did Ross and Yvonne come to be interested in plants? We must begin with Yvonne, for she was the seed, so to speak, who started the process. Yvonne Riddle was born in Timaru and her parents lived at Fairview, on the downs west of the town. Her father had been a musterer in the Mackenzie Country. He knew and liked plants, not in any technical sense, but through close contact with them during his work and through gardening. Yvonne began her gardening while still a schoolgirl.

Later, in wartime, as a young woman, Yvonne became a landgirl, working on farms in the Ashburton Gorge, Hakataramea Valley and at Rotherham in North Canterbury. She knows how to work dogs (though she says she might need the aid of a tin whistle for it nowadays!). A severe and painful accident when a horse bunted her ended that career. Subsequently, she was employed as a laboratory assistant in the Internal Marketing Division food dehydration plant, in Mandeville St, Riccarton. At the time Ross Elder was supervisor of that plant. About 1950 Yvonne took work as an assistant in Morris Hunter's analytical and bacteriological laboratory in Christchurch. During the 50's she participated, on horseback, in a five-day cattle drive from St. James Station, Hanmer, over Fowler's Pass and up the Waiau Valley to Ada Station.

In 1957 Yvonne and some friends went, by sea, to Britain and Europe, where she stayed for about three years. Yvonne's independence and self-reliance paid off, for she obtained work at the Outward Bound School at Aviemore, in Scotland, which received a steady stream of tough youngsters from the poorer parts of Scottish cities. Her first task, on meeting them off the train, was to confiscate the flick-knives and whisky! She helped with cooking and the courses, especially natural history studies.

With three friends, in 1958, she went to Narvik, in Norway, and travelled on fishing boats and buses, or hitch-hiked and walked, to Hammerfest and Nordkapp. They crossed into Finland and wended their way south to Turku,

before crossing by ferry to Sweden. Yvonne worked there for three months in a large hotel-restaurant on an island near Stockholm, as a supervising house-keeper. We can leave her there in the meantime, to examine Ross's career.

Ross was born in Dunedin. While convalescing from a severe childhood illness he stayed with the family of his mother's brother at Shingle Creek, in Central Otago and often returned there in later days. He went to John McGlashan College (both through primary and secondary schooling) and there obtained a prize for senior biology. Ross did his B.Sc. and M.Sc. at Otago University. His thesis subject was the biology of *Taenia hydatigena* (sheep measles), a tapeworm parasite in which dogs are the primary hosts and sheep the commonest secondary hosts. However, chemistry figured strongly in his undergraduate degree and his early employment suggested that he was destined to become an industrial chemist. Nevertheless, he often said that he had always wanted to be a zoologist. For a time he was a demonstrator in biology at Victoria University in Wellington, and then at Canterbury University College.

In 1941, as part of the war effort Ross was sent by the manpower system to Australia, to work on a munitions project near Adelaide. He was a specialist in the pyrotechnics section, producing flares and the like. About this time he and Marie Buchanan were married and Ross returned to New Zealand in 1943, when their first child, Michael, was born. Jacqueline was born in 1946. The family lived, then, in Weston Road, St Albans.

For a time Ross worked for the Ford Company in Wellington, on another munitions project. Then he became chemist and, later, chief chemist at the food dehydration plant in Riccarton. When it closed he worked at the Firestone rubber plant.

In 1953 Ross decided on a radical change of career which was to enable him to have at least some involvement with zoology. He took a position teaching Chemistry and Biology at Timaru Girls' High School. His final employment was at Linwood High School where he taught from 1957 to 1973, first as Head of Biology, later as Head of Chemistry. He was a popular teacher, very much committed to the task. He was especially interested in biochemical aspects of biology. He assisted, also, with the school's drama productions and athletics programme. This led him into administration in the Canterbury Amateur Athletics Association (President 1966-68) and he was much involved with work for the Christchurch Commonwealth Games, in 1974. He also facilitated the combining of boys and girls secondary school athletic competitions in Christchurch.

A gregarious person, Ross was admired by pupils and colleagues alike, as a "character", independent and irreverent. He is renowned, still, for his fund of tales about real people and funny events.

Marie and Ross Elder and family lived in a house in Memorial Avenue during the late 1950s. After Marie's untimely death in 1958, Ross and Yvonne Riddle's paths crossed again and, in 1960, they were married.

While working for Morris Hunter's firm, about 1956, Yvonne decided to attend a meeting of the Canterbury Native Flora Society (the forerunner of the Canterbury Botanical Society). As luck would have it John Thompson also went to that meeting as a new member and the die was cast for Ross to develop an interest in plants and also for what was to become a firm friendship between the Thompsons and the Elders. Ross gradually acquired his love of plants and expertise as a botanist, in the 1960's, by a process of osmosis (very appropriate for a chemist, it would seem!).

Ross and Yvonne first lived in the house in Memorial Avenue but moved to their permanent abode at 328 Centaurus Road, in 1962. It has been the base for a deep and absorbing involvement with the plant world. As all who have been there know, Yvonne assiduously and lovingly tends her garden, which abounds in beautiful perennial herbs, flowering shrubs and trees. Many native plants are there but the Elders enjoyed the introduced species also. Among the treasures are many alpiners, tree paeonies and rare native shrubs. Ross fostered the latter. The garden is a delight to people and to the bellbirds and other birds which frequent it.

Ross and Yvonne were very active members of the Canterbury Botanical Society from the early 1960's onward. Yvonne served on the Committee for a time, but much of her influence on the Society was as a behind-the-scenes supporter of activities such as sales table, field trips and camps. She is unassuming about her skills, but she is a capable botanist with a vast fund of knowledge, and quietly effective at planning and carrying out such activities.

Ross also served on the Committee. He was the Society's President 1969-1973 and Editor of the Journal 1981-88. His influence on the Society's direction was very substantial. We can follow his thinking about such matters in his article "Some thoughts on the future of the Society", CBS Journal 2: 1-2, 1969. He had a scientist's approach to the plant disciplines and ensured that there was proper documentation of written articles, voucher records and the like. He recognised, also, the great importance of protected natural areas. He was a good organiser.

Under Ross's guidance the Society initiated summer camps, and organised workshops, especially for new members. He was also influential in developing the courses for senior secondary school pupils that were run at the Boyle Lodge and the Thomas River Lodge.

In Ross's time as President the membership of the Society rose steadily and field trips were well attended. Summer camps have now become a major highlight of the Society's annual programme. Ross was a sound mentor - as Bryony Macmillan has said, he was ever a source of good advice and a sounding board for ideas.

Ross became so well versed in the subject that he was quite at home among the botanical specialists (though remaining very modest about his own skills). He was influential in getting professionals involved with our Society. Through his deep knowledge of several plant groups (especially the genus *Coprosma*) he showed that he was a very competent botanist.

Both Ross and Yvonne have contributed, prolifically, to the Society's Journal. In CBS Journal No 30, 1996 (Index to Journals 1-29), Yvonne is shown as having authored five articles in her own right, one other, shared with Lucy Moore, and two shared with Ross. In addition Ross wrote ten articles in his own right, three book reviews, two obituaries (one shared) and an editorial. Several of his articles include keys.

Ross helped considerably in the preparation of the small-leaved shrub book, by collection of specimens. He also played a major part in gathering information together for Journal No 30. He was often to be seen in the herbarium at Landcare Research, Lincoln. Yvonne worked for a time as a preparator in the herbarium. Ross's last formal botanical contribution was the article, shared with Phil Garnock-Jones: Garnock-Jones, P.J.; Elder, R. 1966: Nomenclatural validation of *Coprosma pseudocuneata* (Rubiaceae), *N.Z. Journal of Botany* 34: 139-40.

The Elders are well-known as providers of help to professional botanists. Yvonne often drove Lucy Moore to various parts of the South Island, on botanical expeditions. Several visiting overseas botanists were recipients of their hospitality. Ross has helped Tony Druce with his *Coprosma* studies.

Ross and Yvonne have made a major mark on the CBS through their many contributions to its activities. Their effort has done much to maintain the spirit of fellowship among members of the Society. They have also had various other interests, botanical and otherwise. Yvonne's parents lived in Methven for 30 years. Later the Elders made much use of their house during holidays. They

also often went to their favourite place, Central Otago, to visit their relatives and the wonderful vegetation and flora of the Old Man and other nearby ranges. They were involved with the Canterbury Alpine Garden Society and they twice visited Britain/Europe in the 1980's. One of these occasions was a time of great sadness, as they attended the funeral of Ross's son Michael and his wife Pella, who had been killed in a snow avalanche in the British mountains. Jacqueline recalls going to the Chelsea Flower Show with Ross and also their visits to Kew Gardens. The Elders also attended a Botanical Congress and travelled in the Swiss and Norwegian mountains on one of these trips.

Ross and Yvonne, both very likeable and friendly people, were a great team. Ross had a wicked sense of humour. Personally, I always found him good-tempered, but he could get cross at the foibles of people and certainly didn't suffer fools, or the officious and pompous gladly. Yvonne is the essence of kindness and thoughtfulness; her sense of humour is subtle. She tells me that she too can get cross, if provoked. I don't think it happens very often! We are very sorry for her sad loss, wish her many years of enjoyment of her house and garden and hope that she will join us in Society activities, as often as she can.

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REFERENCE

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