

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THE INTRODUCTION OF WATERCRESS BY THE FRENCH AT AKAROA

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This account is an expansion of comments made during discussion at the Etienne Raoul Symposium, 23 November 1996.

Watercress (*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum s. lat*) was introduced by the French at Akaroa in 1840 to provide greens for crews and passengers of French ships calling at the port (Healy, 1962). Plants were subsequently carried over to the infant settlement of Christchurch, and established in the Avon River.

By 1857 watercress was impeding boats on the Avon River, then an important access for goods and passengers to Christchurch. It was such a nuisance that a reward was offered for its eradication (Healy, 1968: 279). Watercress plants were cited as growing “..... to gigantic proportions, being as much as 14 feet in length, and stout in proportion,” (Thompson, 1922:372), and “..... a size never seen in Europe,” (Hooker, 1864a:15)

Thus the species had, with gorse and thistles, created one of the first publicized weed problems in the colony, and a topic for scientific comment here and overseas. By 1864 its control/eradication in the Avon River was costing more than £300 per annum, a large sum and financial burden. At the same time it was responsible for the Canterbury Provincial Council passing The Watercress Ordinance, 1864 to promote control of the weed. This enactment is noteworthy in that it dealt with a single weed, and that up to now, it is the only piece of New Zealand legislation dealing specifically with an aquatic weed (Healy, 1977:17)

The rampant growth of watercress, coupled with the establishment of other adventive species was a matter of considerable interest to botanists and naturalists alike. It was the basis for Hooker (1864:123-7) and Travers (1864: 617-9) commenting in overseas journals of the time on the superiority of Northern Hemisphere plants in newly colonized lands, and that they could ultimately extirpate the indigenous plants.

Of interest too was the suggestion by Ferdinand von Mueller that grazing by the Australian black swan (*Cygnus atratus*) might control, or eradicate the watercress. So, on 11 August 1862, Mrs Deans released two swans on the Avon River, to be followed by birds presented by von Mueller, Sir George Grey, and the local authority.

History has shown that this was an unsuccessful weed control/eradication operation, and that the Australian black swan thrived and became a problem in its own right. On the other hand, Thompson (1922:106) writing of the same black swan, states “This is one of the pronounced successes of naturalisation in New Zealand.”

This last episode would appear to be an historical first - the first attempt, unsuccessful at that, of biological control of a weed in New Zealand.

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