

Acknowledgements

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The Extreme North

An unpublished manuscript by Ross Michie (1894 – 1987), edited by Maureen Young

On 8 June 1945, accompanied by my son Stan, we set out on a survey to Kerr Point near the North Cape, the object being to make a survey of the bird life on the Ninety Mile Beach and the extreme north. It was proposed also to make another search for *Pittosporum pimeleoides* var. *major* [*P. pimeleoides* subsp. *majus*]. It was almost twelve months to the day since Messrs. Beddie, Potts, Finlayson and myself made the trip to the North Cape on a botanical survey. In spite of tireless searching on that occasion we failed to locate the *Pittosporum* referred to. However, Mr. Finlayson has the habit of delving into botanists' past work, and has busied himself since the previous trip in locating the late Mr. Cheeseman's diary on his northern trip in 1896, in which a good indication was given as to where the plant in question was to be found. So thanks to Mr. Finlayson, with this account in my pocket we set off.

Travelling from Kaitaia via the Ninety Mile Beach we reached a point known as Te Werahi. We were then within two miles or so of the new Cape Maria lighthouse on the extreme western tip of the northern coastline. It was just sunset when we arrived at our camping site. We had a hasty meal, prepared a mattress of rushes, and settled down for the night, having in mind to rise at daylight and get under way on our long trek of about twenty-three miles to Kerr Point.

We awakened very early next morning and welcomed the dawn, and with it a clear cloudless sky. Without delay we packed our swags with a minimum of rations, blankets and a change of clothes and before sunrise were away – unfortunately to a false start, the tide being full in we were unable to cross the Te Werahi Stream. This delayed us for an hour and a half. However, once across it we made good progress and immediately commenced to climb a steep hill, which is the commencement of a chain of hills at places reaching a height of 800 to 900 feet. This runs parallel to the sea practically unbroken as far as Spirits Bay, where the chain stops abruptly, there being a large swamp behind the sandhill skirting the beach.

The chain reappears at the eastern end of Spirits Bay and continues to Tom Bowling Bay where it again stops abruptly. The formation of these hills is very different from the hilly country immediately adjoining, which is of very poor quality, clothed with the usual stunted teatree, *Leucopogon*, rushes etc. The soil on the ridge along the coastline is of fair quality, and for the most part is in grass, with sheep, cattle and horses grazing contentedly, giving the place quite a homely appearance. Here and there, on the southern slopes of the ridge, are small pockets of bush ranging from a few trees to patches several acres in extent. These contain the usual northern trees, puriri, rewarewa, taraire, pohutukawa, karaka and many of the small shrubs, and provided quite a pleasant break in the scenery.

On our left, immediately below, was the Tasman, glittering dazzlingly in the bright sunshine. We were soon past the rugged cliff face of Cape Reinga, a spot around which so much Maori legend centres. After tramping for two and a half hours, we descended a long steep hill to sea level, (the Maori name for this spot being Tapotupotu), where we came to the first fresh water stream after leaving our starting point. So far the going was very strenuous, as it had been a series of continual climbing or descending razorback hills. After a pause of fifteen minutes we were on the move again, leading straight up another steep hill. We followed the ridge for a couple of miles or so, then descended to sea level once more, to a small bay eight chains long. This is another interesting spot, being known as Pandora.

From here we followed the rocks around precipitous cliffs and reached Spirits Bay. Here is a soft steep sandy beach four or five miles long, with a very low sandhill running along its entire length, and several chains deep. On this grows a sprinkling of *Coprosma acerosa*, *Muehlenbeckia complexa*, *Cassinia* [*Ozothamnus leptophyllus*] and *Pimelea arenaria*.

Directly behind this low sandy hill is a large swamp, which narrows abruptly after the first mile, but for

another two miles or so a long narrow arm less than a chain wide runs parallel with the sand. Along the edge of this there is fairly easy walking, so we took advantage of it, not hitting the beach again until near the extreme end, where there are extensive remains of old Maori ovens (hangi) or cooking places. Among the stones are chips of obsidian (volcanic glass used by the Maori for cutting flesh) and pieces of human bones which tell their own story. There are also thousands of bleached white shells of the flax snail – *Placostylus hongii* (pupuharakeke) – now almost if not entirely extinct on the mainland [these are not *P. hongii* but *P. ambiguus paraspiritus*, an extinct subspecies].

On reaching the Kapowairua Stream at the eastern end of the beach we rested for a few minutes and read the plaque (concreted into a small recess in a large boulder) to the memory of the late Allen Bell, whose ashes in 1936 had been scattered in the vicinity. It was now well on in the afternoon and we had covered about twelve miles. As we were anxious to get as far as possible before nightfall we pushed on, and climbing a slope covered with large flax bushes, passed under the high, precipitous, stern looking hill of rock above Hoopers Point, which is another interesting spot in Maori legend.

A short distance beyond we passed through a patch of short burnt scrub on a rather poor face, and I was surprised to notice a small patch of maiden-hair fern (*Adiantum aethiopicum*) making a bold attempt to reassert itself. We passed on and up to a steep razorback ridge similar to those already described before reaching Spirits Bay, with every here and there old Maori pa accompanied by the usual food pits, in unexpected places.

We found the going here fairly tiring. Our packs were beginning to feel heavy, but the fascinating nature of everything under such ideal conditions kept us in good heart, and we were still keen to see what the top of the next hill revealed – perhaps an easy grade beyond, we hoped – but more often than not there was a steep descent, which meant our toes being forced tightly into the tips of our boots.

While passing along a track through some stunted teatree and bracken we came on two very healthy plants of the parsley-leaved fern (*Botrychium australe*), each with a short sterile frond and a tall, brown spore-bearing frond, which looked very much out of place. Soon, at quite an elevation, we crossed a tiny stream running over hard rock, then tumbling down an almost precipitous face for 150 feet or so before reaching the sea. Here a native pigeon came to drink, being the only one we saw on our trip.

The next switchback brought us to the largest piece of bush in the extreme north, being in the vicinity of 250 acres in extent. We did not pass through this,

however, as the track followed the top of the cliff, in places only a few yards wide, this being the crest of the ridge. I should have liked to have spent a day inspecting this bush, as it looked very interesting. There seemed, in the failing light, to be several kauri trees growing in fairly heavy bush. On the return journey the following day we slept in the vicinity of this bush. It was dusk when we arrived and barely light when we left again, so unfortunately we did not see much of it.

Another mile or so found us beside a small stream fringed with pohutukawa and large flax bushes. Here we dumped our swags and called it a day, prepared a bed of bushy white teatree twigs against a flax bush, and after a rough but much enjoyed meal we were quite ready to crawl under the blankets, with a tarpaulin substituting as an eiderdown. We half expected mosquitoes to spoil our beauty sleep, however, we were not disappointed that none looked in.

9 June Next morning, clear and crisp with a cloudless sky again, we were on the move as soon as we could see, and climbed a steep hill, then struck a fairly easy grade for about a mile, finally rising another 100 feet or so to reveal a beautiful sunrise, with a small bay about a mile in front of us, and Tom Bowling Bay just beyond – a sight we had been anticipating from every hilltop. Beyond, Kerr Point stood out in the early morning sun, our first words when seeing this welcome sight were, "Thank goodness for that!" It appeared as though we were likely to strike a good grade down to the small bay, with certainly no more hills to climb for the time being. So we decided to leave everything here but our midday rations, trusting that we would be able to make this point again before nightfall, which we did. So with freedom of movement and lightened pack, we were able to make much quicker progress.

As we followed the scrub-covered ridge down towards the small bay referred to above, the track suddenly led off to the right. We found ourselves in the corner of a nice piece of bush several acres in extent, with a number of tall, fairly straight, clean-barreled pohutukawa, growing quite at home among the other bush trees. There were also several fine specimens of *Sideroxylon novo-zelandicum* [*Planchonella costata*] (tawapou) with their large, beautifully coloured fruit in all stages of ripeness, some orange, others orange splashed and blotched with red, while others, quite ripe, were a purple-black. All of these coloured fruit were to be found on the same branch, making a very beautiful sight; they probably rank amongst the prettiest fruit of any of our native trees. Unfortunately the track only passes through three or four chains of this bush, and we came out of it as suddenly as we had entered, finding ourselves down by a fresh water stream leading out on to the small sandy beach we had seen from the hill further back.

We clambered over the rocks which fringed a rugged headland before reaching Waitangi Stream at the commencement of Tom Bowling Bay, a mile or so ahead. On reaching it we removed our boots and socks and walked along the beach barefooted in the cool, wet sand just above the water line. Unlike Spirits Bay, this beach is fairly hard, which makes for easy walking, especially when the tide is half out or lower. As the beach is only about two miles long, the distance was soon covered. There is a low sandhill running the full length of the beach, much the same as at Spirits Bay. Again there is ample evidence of Maori hangi. On a sandy slope there was one unbroken stretch of about 15 chains by one chain wide, which was just a mass of cooking stones, with the accompanying litter of flax snails and other shells.

Having reached the end of Tom Bowling Bay we were now on our last lap before Kerr Point, which was reached after a steady climb of about three miles. The vegetation along this path has already been fully described by Messrs. Beddie, Potts and Finlayson, which will suffice.

We arrived at Kerr Point at 11.30 am. We had a hurried lunch and with very mixed feelings as to the prospects of success, got busy with our search. We had scarcely been going five minutes when, greatly to my surprise and pleasure, I found a slender, flowering stem of *P. pimeleoides* var. *major* pushed up through low stunted teatree about 18 inches high, in company with giant dodder (*Cassytha paniculata*). This parasite, I found later, uses the *Pittosporum* as well as the teatree as a host.

As we now knew exactly what to look for, we soon discovered more plants, all of which were male, and it was quite a while before we could locate a plant with either female flowers or capsules. The plant, unlike *P. pimeleoides* subsp. *pimeleoides*, which often grows into a compact little shrub, is strictly prostrate. It shows no tendency whatever to grow upright, except when striving to reach the sunlight through short, dense scrub, when it pushes its way up and through. The stems, which are very slender, grope their way between and over a jumbled broken mass of volcanic rock. Whenever the stems come in contact with earth (of which there is very little) they send down a few roots and carry on. The leaves, except for being entire, do not resemble any of the forms of *P. pimeleoides*. In shape they are elliptical, elliptical-obovate, or obovate, from half to one and a half inches long, depending to what extent they are exposed to the sun. The same applies to the distance between the whorls, which comprise four to six leaves, and are from half an inch to four inches apart. Each whorl apparently represents a separate growing period, as is the case with *P. cornifolium*.

The flowers are very similar to *P. pimeleoides*, but easily recognised from them. They are terminal, borne in umbels up to eight in number. This applies to the male flowers only; the female flowers are usually solitary, but occasionally number two or three. The peduncle is a light to dark brown in colour, slender and silky pilose, the calyx light green, the portion of the bud extending beyond the calyx is light red, but when the flower opens the petals reflex, showing lemon-yellow, this being the general appearance of the flower. The light red of the bud disappears to a great extent as the flower opens. The flower is larger and on a much longer peduncle than *P. pimeleoides*. On the male plants the peduncles are up to three quarters of an inch long, while on the females they barely exceed a quarter of an inch in length. The capsules are two valved, beaked, showing orange-yellow inside, and contain up to ten seeds set in a yellow, glutinous substance. Both seed and capsule are identical in size and shape to *P. pimeleoides*.

Although Cheeseman has classified this as *P. pimeleoides* var. *major*, nevertheless, in his manual he laments the fact that no further material had been obtained of it, and suggests it may prove distinct. In my opinion, his surmise was quite justified, and I do not doubt that it will in the near future be regarded as a distinct species.

Other plants of interest found growing in this unique spot were – a creeping *Coprosma* with small round leaves [*C. neglecta* s.s.] and a plant with very similar habits to the *Pittosporum*, with tiny white five-petaled, star-like flowers, borne in axillary pairs toward the tips of the branchlets [*Parsonsia praeruptis*]. It was plentiful here, but was not in evidence anywhere else, either on this or the previous trip. Growing here also, directly beneath the familiar *Geniostoma ligustrifolium* [these are hybrids *G. ligustrifolium* var. *crassum* x *G. ligustrifolium* var. *ligustrifolium*], were some fine plants of the prostrate, small-leaved *G. ligustrifolium* var. *crassum*, the difference between the two being very marked, the latter being very brittle.

Leucopogon richei [*L. xerampelinus*], which at times shows a trailing tendency, is not uncommon. The trifoliate, bronze-leaved *Pseudopanax lessonii* [*P. aff. lessonii*], together with a number of other shrubs, are all to be found.

I find it rather difficult to describe the spot in which these plants are growing. The cliff-face at this point is practically bare rock, with a stunted, wind-blown pohutukawa holding on precariously here and there. It is situated at the top of the sloping cliff-face 700 to 800 feet high at Kerr Point, which is actually the northern most extremity of New Zealand, about three miles from North Cape. By some freak of nature, a small semi-circle bites back into the hill (which is a plateau) [this is actually a fault scarp delimiting the non serpentinised, and much harder gabbros from the

Tangihua Ophiolite; serpentinite being softer erodes more freely, hence this description] to a depth of approximately one chain, and is about two chains across the front. It slopes down very steeply from the general plateau level in a deep bowl-like formation. The gales have swept bare the vegetation from the top edge for seven or eight feet back, leaving a collar of red volcanic clay almost giving it the appearance of having been cleared by man. This clear belt may possibly prove to be a blessing in disguise at some future date (in the way of a fire break) should the herb field on the plateau above happen to be fired during a very dry summer, as parts of it have been in the past. The rough nature of the position has also proved a definite advantage, as stock cannot enter, otherwise it would have been eaten out ages ago. However, it is very pleasing to see all the plant life intact and flourishing, probably just as the late Mr. Cheeseman saw it in 1896, when he first discovered the quaint little *Pittosporum*.

After collecting material for pressing and planting, we turned our thoughts to retracing our steps of the past day and a half. By three o'clock of the following afternoon we were back at our starting point, being slightly tender-footed but not tired, and with no regrets. Actually, we had expected the trek to have taken four days instead of three. The distance covered was not less than forty-six miles. The weather from start to finish was perfect, and as on the previous trip with the big three mentioned at the commencement of this report, we have very pleasant memories of it all.

Reference:

Taylor, M. 2002: Meanings and Origins of Botanical Names of New Zealand Plants. *Auckland Botanical Society Bulletin* 26.

An appreciation: Ross Michie (1894 – 1987)

Maureen Young

"You can't miss Ross Michie's house," Lucy Moore told Frank Hudson and me in July 1985 when we took her north to Kaitaia. "It has a giant concrete tulip in the middle of the lawn." Few people can drive through Kaitaia and not notice, and be astounded by, the amazing pink concrete house at 45 South Street. It does indeed have a "giant concrete tulip" in the middle of the lawn, and growing out of this colourful structure is a tall *Kentia* palm. The concrete fence is a crenellated symphony of pink and blue, with tiles and shells to add to its glory. The plants, rather than growing in beds, are contained in large concrete pots, again painted in pink, blue and other pastel colours, and freely decorated with shells (Fig. 1).

All these "rainbows of the naive eye" ¹ were the work of Ross Henry Michie (pronounced Mickie) (Fig. 2), and although the property is now somewhat faded and neglected, an idea can still be gained of what it was

Footnote about the aforementioned "big three".

(by Maureen Young)

Andrew Davidson Beddie (1880 – 1962). Scottish born stonemason who lived in Petone, NZ. He was a foundation member of the Wellington Botanical Society and collected many seeds and plants to stock Otari Native Botanic Garden. (Taylor 2002: 28).

Norman Potts (1886 – 1970) of Opotiki, grandson of T.H. Potts. He collected and grew NZ plants especially those of eastern North Island, NZ. (Taylor 2002: 146). Norman was a lawyer, and chairman of the Hikutaia Domain Board. He was awarded the Loder Cup in 1944, and was a foundation member of Auckland Botanical Society.

Maclean Cameron (Cam) Finlayson (1898 – 1969) was a bagpipe-playing Waipu Scotsman who lived in Warkworth for many years, where he worked for the Waitemata Electric Power Board. He was well known locally for his botanical interests.

Between three of the men on the 1944 trip, these plants were named in their honour: *Pittosporum michiei* [and a snail *Placostylis ambiguus michiei* – endemic to the Surville Cliffs], *Chionochloa beddiei*, *Coriaria pottsiana*, *Scirpus pottsii* [*Isolepis pottsii*], and *Myosotis petiolata* var. *pottsiana*. Potts Peak in the Raukumara Range is also named for Norman Potts (John Kendrick *pers. comm.*)

like in Ross's heyday. His working life was spent farming near Kaitaia, and in the 1950s he bought a rough section on the outskirts of the town, and set about building the house and grounds that must have proved startling to his conservative farming colleagues. Ross came from a family with wide interests. His brother Charles was well known in astronomy circles, and Ross was a natural historian with several strings to his bow. He was interested in birds, and his observations were recorded in the Ornithological Society Journal "Notornis" in the 1950s. A species of flax snail from Kerr Point, North Cape, was named after him (*Placostylus ambagiosus michiei*). But it was as an amateur botanist with an extensive knowledge of the flora of the Far North that he was best known. Botanists and scientists from all over the country consulted Ross when they ventured north, and he could be relied on to lead them to the plants or sites that interested them. His specialty was the genus