

# Obituary: Elsie Craig Gibbons

## MB.Ch.B, D.C.h. London. FRCP Edin

### July 1916 – September 2009

*Darea Sherratt compiler<sup>1,2</sup>*

Elsie Gibbons died on 17 September 2009 aged 93. A decade before that she was out and about with the Wellington Botanical Society (BotSoc) and the Sunday Walking Group, telling her tales, discussing the plants and occasionally ministering to the injured.

She came from an established Wellington mercantile family and grew up in Khandallah with two sisters and two brothers. Never marrying, Elsie gave much of her time to her nieces and nephews, to Marsden (her old school), to Kimi Ora School, the Home of Compassion, the Ornithological Society, the Classical Association and still found time for her medical practice and to come on field trips.

Her interest in native plants started at school. In her teens Elsie won the Knox Gilmer Botanical Prize at Marsden. The family had regular camping holidays in her childhood and the family remember her collecting and pressing plants for her project whilst on holiday.

Elsie trained as a doctor. First studying in Dunedin, then London and later qualifying as a paediatrician in Edinburgh. She returned to New Zealand in 1950 and a few years later set up practice in Abel Smith Street. There she found time to tend her garden. Elsie liked to have colour, “but no purple”. In retirement, she moved to Eastbourne and continued her interest in gardening—there the old fruit trees pleased her.

It is not clear when Elsie joined BotSoc, probably in 1960 and certainly by the end of that year. Elsie served her time on the committee from 1961 through to 1966 and again in 1976 and 1977. She would have heard about the botanical society from her sister, Marjorie Harrison, who was a foundation member.

The name of Elsie Gibbons appears in Tony Druce’s Trip Book for the first time in December 1960 on a trip to Rocky Hills Road and Pahaoa Taipos in the Wairarapa. After that, her name crops up regularly (Fig. 1), often accompanied by nieces and nephews.

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2 With assistance from Helen Druce, Peter Gibbons, Colin Ogle, Rodney Lewington, Don Robertson, and Ted Williams.



Figure 1. Mitre Peak Track, 1963. Photo from family records.

Tales of Elsie on trips are legend. Helen Druce remarked on the vitality that Elsie showed—climbing thousands of feet each day when in the Anatoki Range to reach the alpine plants. Whilst Elsie could name most vascular species, it has been noted by several of the old timers that she often produced the same species for identification in the evening “show and tell” sessions on trips. She recognised birds in their seasonal changes and development, and noted the rock types in relation to plants.

Many times we were fortunate to have Elsie as a trip doctor, attending to minor and major injuries. For example, stitching up the scalp of her contemporary, Isabel Morice, at Black Birch (but not until after Elsie had eaten her dinner) and soothing the blisters of the young tenderfeet (Fig. 2). Her forceful personality came to the fore when she browbeat Air New Zealand to have Jack Coulter evacuated to Wellington Hospital from Nelson after his knee had been badly crushed.

In camp Elsie pulled her weight, taking on her share of the chores even after a long day’s march. She did have her own ideas when it came to cooking. Over an open fire Elsie could produce six pints of perfect unburnt custard although it was rather a slow process using two billies in the form of a bain-marie. She had her own way of cooking each dish and brooked no interference—to the extent that some old hands opted not to cook when Elsie was on duty. At the end of the day Elsie could enjoy singing sessions and was word perfect in old student and tramping songs.



Figure 2. Photo Don Roberston.

Many of us remember toiling up and down hills with heavy packs behind Elsie fascinated by her tales of overseas travels, books she had just found, family tales, snippets of Greek mythology, of geology, biology and the other interests she pursued. If the conversation lagged, Elsie was known to disagree with an expressed opinion just to have the pleasure of an argument. Elsie could be disconcerting, but more often amusing and above all interesting.

Car maintenance was not her strong point. When camp broke up on a frosty morning and her car would not start, she had to admit that it might have been because it had not been serviced for a year—or more. Elsie also had a habit of asking for advice on a particular issue from several people and then going her own way.

Her idiosyncrasies had to be accepted as part of her strong personality. Elsie's siblings and nieces were familiar with her lack of inhibitions. It took BotSoc members a little while to get used to her tendency to strip off for a swim—her remark that “everyone has one” was her response to any one who looked askance. The sight of Elsie backing out of her tent demanding to know the whereabouts of her knickers could be disturbing. On the other hand her vitality, enthusiasm and enjoyment of swimming, sliding in the snow (Fig. 3), crossing a swing bridge, admiring a view or just walking in the sun or the rain was infectious. We were enriched by her experience.



Figure 3. In the Remarkables, January 1992. Photo: Colin Ogle.

Elsie was missed when she was no longer able to walk any distance and could not go on BotSoc field trips. She then enjoyed outings with the Sunday Walking Group, consisting mainly of older BotSoc members. Their excursions covered most of the walking tracks around Wellington.

As her memory failed we missed Elsie's keen mind and well thought arguments. She will be remembered for her idiosyncrasies but more so for her massive enthusiasm in everything she tackled and for her generosity of spirit and of time where she thought she could be useful.