

Obituary: Helen Margaret Druce

M.A. Geography, Canterbury College

1921–2010

Neill & Barbara Simpson¹

This tribute to Helen is drawn from a number of sources including family notes contributed by Alison and Oliver, notes from Rodney Lewington and other Botanical Society members, as well from our recollections over 44 years of companionship and fabulous trips.

I met Helen on my first Wellington Botanical Society trip, to the Northern Oterei Taipos in December 1966, trip number 528 (of 985 by 1994) in “Tony’s Trip Book”, a marvellous and useful record. The trip book also records that Helen Hodgson first appeared in these records on a Canterbury University College Tramping Club trip in March 1940 and then was a frequent member of trips over the next three years.

Helen was born in Hastings on 21 July, the 4th child of Frederick and Amy Hodgson. She grew up on the family farm “Kiwi Valley” near Wairoa. Her mother Amy was a keen gardener and later a world authority on bryophytes and this no doubt had some influence on Helen and her later interests. Helen attended primary school at Turiroa riding to school on horseback with elder sister Lucy.



Helen Druce.



Helen Druce, on trip to Mount Somers, January 1993.

1. 181 Peninsula Road, Queenstown.

The Napier earthquake of 1931 affected the farmhouse, shifting it off its foundations and felling the chimney. The family camped outside for some weeks as the house was unsafe. Lucy was at Napier Girls High School and it was two weeks before she could get home to Wairoa (by boat). This all sounds somewhat familiar after the recent massive quakes in the Christchurch area.

Helen then went to Iona Presbyterian School for Girls which had been founded by her great grandfather Hugh Campbell. In her final year at Iona, Helen was head girl and dux. Helen then proceeded to Bishop Julius Hostel and Canterbury College where she excelled academically as well as representing the college in netball and swimming. She completed an MA in Geography writing her masters thesis on the land use and history of the Kiwi Valley farm. After a year at Christchurch Teachers College, she taught for a number of years at Christchurch Girls High. It was while in Christchurch that she met Tony and her lifelong friend Flora Christeller (also a long-time Botanical Society member).

After the war Helen (and Tony) moved to Wellington where she joined the Tararua Tramping Club in 1946 and worked as Librarian at Wallaceville Animal Research Station. Helen and Tony married on 22 December 1947 and moved to a damp little house in Wyndham Road, which Helen always insisted was haunted. Later they bought a section at 123 Pinehaven Road, and had an architect-designed home built there after heroic earth-moving with shovel and wheelbarrow. I remember further heroics of this nature when a slip came down beside and behind the house years later.

As well as bringing up three children—Alison, Oliver and Fenella—and undertaking numerous botanical expeditions all over New Zealand, Helen became the leading light and guiding force of the Pinehaven Library. Later she was librarian and teacher of remedial reading at Upper Hutt College.

Helen Druce was an amazing person who could converse on a very wide range of subjects. Arriving for a cup of tea you had to share the table with piles of books, but she was probably best known for her interest and knowledge of plants, so that on botanical trips, with Tony often way ahead, Helen could be relied on for information often with interesting anecdotes. Her garden was equally important and included her vegetables and fruit trees as well as the wonderful collection of native plants. It was always a pleasure to tour the garden with expert guide Helen who always remembered exactly where each plant came from. She often added interesting details about the plant and/or its collection. Three *Hebe arborea* [*H. parviflora*] (from Ripia trip to the Mohaka) were flowering “a mass of white racemes and smothered in bees, bumble bees and native flies”. Visiting

a neighbour's garden "we told him pampas and ladder fern were not natives. I was weeding nearby just so I could see them." The once wide vehicle driveway up to the house became a narrow pathway as plants, compost and other garden material vied for space.

One letter from Helen told us of "six compost heaps" and of spending "a fortune [I can almost hear Helen's voice with its ascending emphasis on forrrrtune] on mushroom compost and lots of other good things" to boost her very productive vegetable garden and blackcurrant bushes. In another letter she had "17 plum trees which should be enough for the increasing number of pigeons [keruru] and Tony and me. One tree covered with blossom is filled with white eyes pollinating it and eating lard and Kremelta." She told us about "being invaded by bellbirds which I thought was wonderful, but they have dominated the tuis, our old friends who used to be the real kings singing all day from the tops of tall trees." Helen read widely on all aspects of natural history and was a wealth of knowledge on many subjects. She wrote of "finding a beautiful specimen of what Hudson calls *Porina characterifera* a rare Hepialid large moth" and of "a poor year for cicadas."

Another interest of Helen's was people. She was a great communicator and kept up-to-date with family and friends and could offer astute comment on most people she came in contact with but always positive, with a big smile; it was never gossip. The loss of Fenella, and just at the start of a promising career, was a great shock but led to the wonderful memorial that is Fenella Hut.

Helen was always positive not only with her comments, but also in her attitude to life and her commitment to healthy food and living. Healthy, home-cooked food was invariably served and we can remember collecting apples, plums and gooseberries from roadsides and other wild places for stewing or bottling or freezing. Her enthusiasm for many things including sports and wide knowledge, was generously shared and an inspiration.

Barbara and I feel fortunate to have been part of the Druce extended family. Helen and Tony encouraged children and young people to participate in their outdoor activities and our three boys attended Botanical Society trips and private forays almost from birth. Like their own family, young people were encouraged to be independent and to enjoy the freedom of the outdoors.

We feel privileged to have been associated with the Druce family. Both Helen and Tony have been a big influence in our lives as they have on many others.