

Obituary: Arnold William John Dench

26 March 1927 – 29 August 2010

Eleanor Burton (compiler)^{1, 2}

When Arnold and Ruth first bought their Newlands property in 1949 it was a bare hillside, and when they first went to see it, they had to hold on to each other to stand up in the wind. Over the next sixty odd years they turned it into an amazing collection of New Zealand's native plants, particularly of the alpine flora. Arnold said this was partly self defence as alpine plants were the only thing that could cope with the Newlands climate. His enthusiasm for these plants and their cultivation was extensive, and he never stopped trying to increase his knowledge, looking for new books or papers, or old books not seen before. He had an impressive library and could quickly find any information required. His knowledge of early New Zealand botanists was remarkable.

The garden initially expressed his horticultural interests; i.e., his love for all plants. The focus on indigenous plants became more committed in the late 1980s, but it was when he met Tony Druce in the 1990s that the horticulturist became an amateur botanist. It was from this point that his interest in, and knowledge of, alpine plants became his central focus and passion.

Arnold was brought up in south Canterbury; first in the small railway settlement of Waihou Downs and later in Waimate where he completed his secondary schooling.



Arnold Dench. Granddaughter Ruth's wedding, Wilton House, Wellington, 2008. Photo: Aman Hunt.

1. 25 Ngaio Gorge Road, Ngaio, Wellington 6035.

2. With assistance from Don Crampton, Pat Enright, Olaf John, and Gavin Dench.

He moved to Christchurch for work at the Department of Agriculture, and was subsequently transferred to the Wellington office, where he met Ruth. They married in 1950. He was also briefly employed at the Wellington Public Library, and then later at the Wellington City Council.

There were significant financial difficulties in getting the house built. Arnold got a job with the Railways, which provided staff housing. They moved into their Lyndfield Lane home in 1954, and even then it was not completed. At that stage he was working for the Tourist and Publicity Department. But because of illness, medical advice was that he should seek work that took him outside, so he joined the Post Office, doing postal delivery. He followed that period by working as the manager of the Plant Shop at Woolworths in Johnsonville, and then later set up a commercial cleaning company in partnership with Doug Turner. It was from this work that he finally retired.

Arnold impressed all of us with his indomitable spirit, grit and determination, and his strength of character and purpose. Although he suffered ill health on and off throughout his life, particularly during winters, his intellectual prowess was not diminished, and his interest in discussing matters of life, religion and politics was strong until the last.

The range of his interests was wide. He was very fond of music, poetry and history as well as plants. He also had a lifelong enthusiasm for railways.

He was part of the generation that sought to express and expand a particularly New Zealand identity. He loved the poetry of Baxter and the music of Lilburn, paintings of Woolaston and Rita Angus, the photography of Robin Morrison, the laconic humour of Barry Crump. His interests also included New Zealand history, Maori/Pakeha relations and ecology from Guthrie Smith to Geoff Park. He left behind a large library of books, tapes, CDs and records by and of these artists and writers.

While working for New Zealand Rail he met Denis Glover who had missed the last train, and paid and arranged for a taxi to get him home. He considered this his contribution to New Zealand literature.

Pat Enright says of Arnold: “Arnold was the proverbial ‘scholar and a gentleman’. In the years that I was fortunate enough to know him he has been a good friend, a mentor and someone who was always interested in everything that grows from weeds to the rarest of native plants. Add to this his love of books and a keen interest in all things taken by mouth be it food, tea or alcoholic beverages and there was always plenty of scope for a stimulating conversation.”

He was very generous in sharing his knowledge, and indeed his plants with anyone who asked. For me he was inspirational, rekindling my interest

in alpine plants. Over many years and much patient experimentation he had accumulated a detailed knowledge of their requirements and the best way to go about growing them, going to such lengths as putting ice around his *Ranunculus lyallii* all winter so that they would flower. He had favourite genera, particularly he was interested in *Ranunculus*, *Myosotis*, *Ourisia* and *Celmisia*, but he could also find enthusiasm for odd things like *Gonocarpus* and *Galium*.

I'll miss the morning teas on Mondays when you never knew what you were walking into—discussions of history, music, plants, and old acquaintances were wide ranging and often very entertaining. Anyone turning up was welcome.

Word of his garden got around. He would get people turning up from the other side of the world asking for a tour, and they always got one, for no charge and usually with morning tea thrown in.

As many botanists are not horticulturists, they would give plants to Arnold to grow, or indeed just ask whether he had the relevant specimen, as Newlands was more accessible than the Southern Alps. His collection contained plants from many botanists, including many from Tony Druce. Some plants puzzled him though—there are many sedges in the collection just named “*Carex* sp.”, with a source and a donor; further identification was too hard.

As with any native garden, the plants after a while start to seed themselves around, or even just to spread. Arnold could never quite see them as weeds, and was puzzled and amused by the tendency particularly of endangered plants to run amok. Arnold had a few problems with his collection. Keeping track of specimens and their provenance is always a problem, and labels are vulnerable to UV, time, and in Arnold's garden depredations by cats. Because of the proximity of a lot of genetically related plants, odd examples of hybrid material and seedlings would turn up in pots of named plants and add to the difficulty of tracking the collection.

Arnold joined the Wellington Botanical Society with some trepidation, but soon gained respect for his seriousness, knowledge and ability in propagation of difficult species, particularly alpine plants and orchids. He became a committee member and was elected president, a job he did with some distinction. He gained the trust and friendship of Tony and Helen Druce, and has many plants in his collection that were contributed by Tony Druce. Arnold and Ruth would usually bring plants along to the evening meetings to sell, always with information about the plant and its requirements, and with typical generosity all proceeds went to the Jubilee Fund.

Pat Enright was a frequent contributor of specimens to Arnold's garden, and says he has lost track of the number and variety of specimens he has sent to Arnold from all over the country, both weeds and native plants. He would grow a lot of things on to the flowering stage to enable an identification to be made. The greenhood orchid *Pterostylis porrecta* is one species that comes to mind. Pat got a ring from Arnold about this odd looking *Pterostylis* so passed the comment on to Ian St George who made the identification. At this point it was known as far south as Hawke's Bay. Subsequently Peter Beveridge found it growing in the Porirua reserve after seeing it flowering in Arnold's garden.



Ruth and Arnold Dench. Evening stroll, Moa Point, Wellington, 2000.
Photo: Gavin Dench.

Arnold's neighbour, Don Crampton, and his wife Alison arrived at the gate of 39 Lyndfield Lane off the Lyttelton ferry, straight from their honeymoon, to settle in Wellington. They were not unpacked when two little girls knocked on the back door. Ruth had sent Ali and Rae over with some flowers to welcome them to the neighbourhood. Forty-six years later they were still there, friends as well as neighbours.

The garden was a lot of work, being a large area on a steep section with a lot of plants with odd and specific requirements, and Ruth and Arnold would be out in it in all sorts of weather. Don Crampton tells how Alison

would open their lounge window, and Ruth would look up and say, “I’m just going, I’m just going!” The garden was her life, as it was for Arnold.

It is just not possible to think of Arnold without including Ruth.

Many of you will remember a feature in the Independent Herald some years ago about the two of them, with a photo of them sitting up the back, and the heading ‘The gnomes of Newlands’.

When the boys were old enough, Arnold regularly took them tramping, while Ruth went with the girls to a borrowed house in Waitarere Beach, worrying about them, and waiting for their safe return. Ruth and Arnold inspired in their children a love of the outdoors and the natural world.

Arnold has left his collection of plants (but not the trees!) to Otari, and we are currently in the process of sorting, identifying and transferring them. As many as practical will be shared or duplicated to Percy Reserve, to help ensure their continued survival.